

**Town of Belmont, Massachusetts
MBTA COMMUNITIES ADVISORY COMMITTEE
MEETING MINUTES**

March 14, 2024

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

Absent: Paul Joy

Town Staff: Christopher Ryan

The meeting was called to order at 7:36 pm. The meeting was held virtually via Zoom and in person in Belmont Town Hall Annex.

1) Roundtable Discussion

Rachel Heller provided an overview of the state goals for 3A zoning as well as the goals and purpose of Belmont's Housing Production Plan, which the Planning Board and the Select Board have endorsed. She posed the question: what can the MBTA Communities zoning do for Belmont since housing is the best investment the town can make? Rachel recommended zoning changes through the MBTA Communities Act that advance Belmont's Housing Production Plan. She noted that by including the following changes that Belmont can increase affordability as the Town grows:

- all three Belmont Housing Authority properties should be included;
- underutilized parcels named in the Housing Production Plan should be included;
- zoning should allow for up to 4 stories by right in some parts of the multifamily district;
- affordability should be incentivized through density bonuses; and
- the zoning proposal should use parking maximums instead of parking minimums to allow flexibility for developers, reduce the cost of housing production, and to encourage biking, public transit, walking, and car sharing.

Julie Wu thanked Roy and Rachel for the great leadership on this matter. She remarked that 3A provides opportunities for change in town by providing an option for additional housing. Prior studies recommended adding housing to the town centers to encourage foot traffic to the businesses. The law has some peculiarities that have been a challenge but the committee has applied the zoning where it works best for Belmont. She supports Option #4. She confirmed with Gloria Leipzig who is on the Belmont Housing Authority Board that 3A provides opportunities for the Belmont Housing Authority to create more deeply affordable housing units. Gloria also indicated that BHA properties included in the Town's 3A zoning is likely to attract state funding which is important for these properties. Julie Wu also observed that the downside of Scenario #4 is that it is less spread across town than she would prefer.

Drew Nealon reported that the Historic District Commission preferred the Option #4 map since the zoning is spread around town and stays away from the Pleasant St. Historic District. There could be a historic preservation incentive in the zoning that would provide a bonus density if an historic building was preserved like what happened with the Chapel at McLean.

Patrick Murphy stated that he can not support any of the options because they have too many units. He thinks that the zoning should only meet the minimum requirement of 1632 units plus a buffer. He also thinks that the committee has spent too much time looking at the minutiae and that the Planning Board should take over immediately. Patrick requested that the number of net new units be included in the discussion.

Thayer Donham endorsed Scenario #4 as the option closest to the minimum requirements which is preferred by the majority of the Planning Board. She then jumped into the minutiae and suggested adding 36 and 38-40 Thomas Street back into the map since they are part of Belmont Village. In addition, she thought 7 Brighton Street should be added as the MMU typology since there will be MMU across the street. She acknowledged that the 7 Brighton St property was recently redeveloped so it is unlikely to be redeveloped any time soon. She stated that she was not a fan of removing the Demo Delay properties since the delay does not prevent demolition and reiterated Drew Nealon's suggestion of having a density bonus for preserving historic properties written into the zoning.

Roy Epstein reviewed the most recent version of the Scenario #4 map. He described some of the recent tweaks he made to the map to address concerns we have heard from the public. He noted that the Scenario #4 map has about 1800 units. The committee has been advised to provide 1632 units plus at least a 10% buffer so that when the map is submitted to EOHLC it is likely to meet the requirements and get approved. He stated that this is a realistic minimum number of units and because of the contiguity requirement the 3A areas cannot be spread out further. When other areas get bigger, the Waverley area has to get bigger to compensate. He suggested that there is more work to do especially around the land use dimensions. Funding has been identified to get Utile on board so that the look and feel of this zoning can be specified.

Chris Ryan reminded the committee that the underlying zoning still applies so the market will help make future decisions about what will and can be built.

Rachel Heller reminded the committee that this is zoning not actual housing production. There are three components necessary for this to occur: the desire to redevelop a property, good zoning and the necessary financing. She agreed that demolition delay does not mean a property cannot be developed and those parcels on the demo delay list should be added back in the map. She would like all the Belmont Village parcels included in the map.

Julie Wu agreed that Trapelo Road needs redevelopment but this is not the right tool for that because the existing commercial uses need to be maintained and improved. Roy Epstein agreed that the 3A zoning is not a good commercial redevelopment tool.

In response to Patrick Murphy's request to understand the net new units being considered in this proposal, Roy Epstein indicated that roughly 1700 units are in the current model and about 500 units exist now so the net unit count is about 1200 units. No one knows when those new units would be developed. We do know there is interest in redeveloping part of Moraine Street, that Joe DeStefano would like to develop another building behind the new ones in Waverley and that the Belmont Housing Authority is working on a redevelopment Plan for Sherman Gardens.

Roy Epstein asked what would happen if we wanted to make minor modifications to the 3A districts or the zoning language? Chris Ryan thought that may be difficult but that changes would be possible. Rachel Heller reported that soon there will be more than three examples of 3A zoning to mine for ideas.

2) Discussion of Consultant

Chris Ryan indicated that to address the need for graphical images he had had meetings with three urban design firms: Utile, Dover Cole and DPZ. Utile is already working on 3A zoning and can do form based code light. Chris Ryan reported that he was able to find funding and thought he could have a contract in place next week. He spoke to staff at the City of Somerville who advised that Utile should not try to use something already developed for other communities and we should ensure that they should do the due diligence to produce the right materials for Belmont.

3) Meeting minutes

The March 6th 2024 meeting minutes were approved.

4) Public Comments

Shelia Flewelling said that she was grateful to Roy Epstein for making a map with the lower density in Waverley.

Evie Maliris asked what would Utile produce? Chris Ryan responded that we should get a zoning report like the Newton Villages document or Brookline's Washington Street. The purpose is to show what the town of Belmont wants a developer to produce.

Rena Fonseca asked if we could submit the map for a pre-review rather than put in 10% additional number of units? Chris Ryan responded that EOHLIC needs 90 days to review and we do not have enough time. Rachel Heller added that the review needs to include the zoning language which is not complete yet. The zoning language and the economic impact study will be done about the same time. Roy Epstein also noted that the model is in flux.

Utile will help define some assumptions but EOHLC can reject parcels due to subjective criteria so it is prudent to have a buffer.

Linn Hobbs indicated that in his opinion it would be impossible to not require parking since there is no on-street parking allowed. Rachel Heller suggested that Utile will help facilitate the parking discussion. Roy Epstein said that the Planning Board will work on the parking issue. He noted that Sherman Garden's has 100 units but only 83 cars and the 100 Lexington Street apartment building has a half empty parking lot. We need to study other communities since 2 parking spaces per unit creates huge parking areas. The Cushing Square overlay requires 1 parking space per unit.

Jeanne Mooney asked if the Planning Board planned to change the underlying zoning. Chris Ryan answered no because the proposal is for an overlay district. Rachel Heller noted that some communities are doing 3A zoning as the base zoning but the Belmont MBTA Advisory committee is recommending an overlay district because it allows the property owners to retain their current development rights. This should help with the discussion at Town Meeting.

5) Next Meetings:

- **Wednesday, March 20 from 7:30 -9:30 pm in a Hybrid Format at the Town Hall Annex.**
- ***Tentative:* Wednesday, March 27 from 7:30-9:30 in a Hybrid Format at the Town Hall Annex.**
- **PUBLIC FORUM, March 28th at 7:00 – 9:00 pm. Location TBD.**
- **Wednesday, April 3 from 7:00 – 9:00 pm for Committee to vote on map and narrative.**

Meeting adjourned at 9:25 pm.

Minutes recorded by Thayer Donham.