

Minutes Appendix

Paul Joy Statement

Good evening, everyone, and welcome to this important meeting of the Belmont Economic Development Committee. As your Chair and a fellow Belmont resident, I'm honored to see so many of you here—both in person and via Zoom—to discuss the proposed zoning changes for Belmont Center. My goal tonight is to make this meeting a true opportunity for us to hear from you: our business owners, homeowners, and community members.

We're gathered here because many of you—especially Belmont Center business owners—feel that your voices haven't been adequately heard by the Planning Board and Select Board about these significant zoning changes. Homeowners and residents have also raised concerns about how these proposals might impact their properties, local businesses, and the character of Belmont Center. Your input is vital, and I'm committed to ensuring it shapes our next steps.

Why the Town Is Pushing This

The town views these zoning changes as a way to strengthen its finances by growing the commercial base. More revenue could support our schools, roads, and services—goals I know many of us share. But zoning changes without a clear strategy or agreed-upon outcomes aren't responsible. We need to ask: Does the fiscal analysis add up? And will the benefits outweigh the disruption? These are practical questions that need real answers.

We need a plan that's been thoroughly examined, with risks and rewards carefully balanced—and that starts with listening to those most affected.

Engaging Business Owners

One thing is clear: we must do more to involve Belmont Center businesses. At The recent Belmont Center Business Association (BCBA) meeting business owners shared worries about declining sales and competition from big chains that could dominate new, high-rent spaces. They asked questions about vision, parking, and about how far along the process the town had taken. My takeaway from the meeting was that they wanted to engage and be heard. The town hasn't done enough to include you in this process, and that has to change. Your livelihoods are on the line, and your expertise is critical.

As EDC Chair, and as somebody that has seen four different Planning Board chairs during my tenure, I've been working to close this gap. I've attended every Planning Board meeting and our

members have talked with neighbors and business owners as this issue gains traction. Our committee even hosted a 9pm meeting the same night as the first consultant charette to ensure that our members could talk about this project in an open and public session. This process has been rapid, and it's unclear whether it will be ready for town meeting in May. But that's why I'm pushing for broader engagement, including getting a Select Board member to the next BCBA meeting to hear from you directly. And that is also why tonight matters.

Reaching the Wider Community

Beyond businesses, I've been connecting with other key voices. Landlords, residents, and other committees. I will absolutely attend next month's BCBA meeting. But real engagement means including everyone—homeowners, residents, and all affected parties—not just a select few. The town must commit to transparency across the board. This means honestly answering people's questions. And fully exploring the impacts on people.

Showing You the Plan

Before we open the floor, I want everyone to see exactly what's being proposed. Here are prepared visual representations of the zoning changes, including zoom-in photos, streetscape views, and before-and-after images. These visuals will show how Belmont Center's layout, traffic, and character could change. Let's take a moment to look at them together.

[Pause for visual presentation]

These images make the scale of the proposal clear and show why we need to get this right. They also highlight why your feedback—from those who know Belmont Center best—is so essential.

Key Questions We Need Answered

To move forward responsibly, we must demand clarity on these points:

What will be the construction impacts on existing Belmont Center Businesses?

- Who is the deciding authority on Claflin Street?
- How does this differ from existing zoning, where developers can have two stories by right and three stories by special permit?
- What is the impact to traffic in the study area and elsewhere in Belmont (namely Waverly Square and Brighton/Blanchard)

- Parking availability both during construction and after construction? For on-street, private Locatelli Parking Lot, and the Claflin Lot?
- Would there be any construction phasing to mitigate the impact the impact to local businesses?
- Has there been any feedback to this plan from the town engineering department, the historic district commission, the traffic advisory committee, or any other boards/committees in Belmont (Warrant Committee)
- Economic Impact – how many new net sqft of commercial and residential would this add to Belmont’s tax base? When could we expect a preliminary revenue estimation from the town’s consultant? What about the cost side including electrical, water, sewer, stormwater, and other utility requirements?
- How does this impact the Belmont Light Building (also town owned)?

We must also answer the BCBA’s questions, as you can see on the screen.

- What is the going per sq/ft rate in each of the town's 3 districts?
- Do businesses in Belmont do enough dollars annually to keep their occupancy costs at a healthy 5-10% of gross revenue?
- How has the rise in property taxes affected businesses with triple-net leases?
- Have Belmont Center businesses been negatively affected by the vacancies on Leonard Street?
- Which categories of businesses in Belmont Center have seen falling sales for the last 3 years?

These questions aren’t optional—they’re critical to develop a plan that works for Belmont.

A Vision That Works for All

This committee and our permanence and our focus and engagement over the past several years have been critical to advancing the narrative and the actual lived experience that Belmont is becoming business friendly. We have allocated grant funding for local businesses. We have helped launch paid work based learning internships for our high school students. We were key drivers in restaurant reform. And we ensured that 3A did not reduce our chance to expand the towns tax base. We have attended town day in the center, advocated for hotels, and have been the strongest advocates for hiring an economic development coordinator.

And we know change is not something you can quit on or simply give us. When somebody says

we should give up on economic development my response is a simple—Don't even think about it. Because Belmont is worth fighting for.

But at the same time changes must support existing businesses, protect homeowners, and preserve what makes this place special. Quitting on economic development calls into question whether we should even have an economic development committee. Whether we should rightly pursue changes elsewhere in town, and allowing uses like hotels and hospitality. Simply put, quitting is not an option.

Your Turn to Speak

Tonight, I'm asking you—business owners, homeowners, residents—to share your thoughts. Voice your concerns, ask your questions, and offer your ideas. This is your chance to shape Belmont's future. After we hear from you, I'll follow up on the issues raised and ensure nothing gets ignored.

Let's make tonight a turning point—a moment where we insist on a Belmont that works for everyone. Where we don't give in to ultimatums but instead focus on people. Thank you for being here. Let's begin with your voices.

Business Center Letters

Katherine Venzke

Hello Paul and Taylor,

I know you will both be at the BCBA meeting this evening. Unfortunately, I have the flu and will not be attending.

As you know, many Belmont Center businesses are very concerned about the Belmont Center Zoning Project. There have been community meetings and discussions about this plan, but as true in all communities, small business owners have a hard-time finding time to attend these events. This often leaves our needs overlooked. As Belmont lacks a Chamber of Commerce and an Economic Development Coordinator, the voices of business owners are most often not heard.

Since I will not be at the meeting, I am forwarding you a letter I wrote to my fellow BCBA members. This is not the way we ALL feel, but a summary of the mood. There is little direct communication between the town and Belmont Center businesses.

I appreciate your attention to this matter, and look forward to your input at tonight's meeting.

Thank you,

Katherine Venzke, Owner

Helena's

34 Leonard Street

ilovehelenas.com

----- Forwarded message -----

From: **Katherine Venzke** <katherine.venzke@gmail.com>

Date: Wed, Feb 26, 2025 at 2:53 PM

Subject: Requesting More Communication in Proposed Changes to Belmont Center

To: lee gaston <lee@bessieblue.com>, Belmont Toys <deranmuckjian@verizon.net>, Mary Thomajan Westcott <mary@westcottmercantile.com>, Vicki Frassica <vfrassica@verizon.net>, Stacey Conroy <staceybconroy@gmail.com>

To Fellow Belmont Center Business Owners:

As a business owner in Belmont Center, I request an in-depth and connected partnership between the Town and Belmont Center merchants regarding the proposed changes in Belmont Center.

I own Helena's at 34 Leonard Street. I have run a location of my shop in Arlington for 20 years. For 7 years I had a location of my store in Cushing Square, and I relocated to Belmont Center in November 2019. I have served on business boards and committees in Arlington, Cushing Square and Co-Chaired the Economic Development Committee for the town of Belmont.

There is a diverse group of businesses packed into the short block of Leonard Street. The make-up of Belmont Center's businesses is the envy of other Main Streets. There is a kitchen store, a bookstore with a cafe, at least 3 more independent bakeries with coffee service. There are 5 women's clothing boutiques, one run by an independent designer, and one being the flagship location of the most successful high-end consignment boutique in the Boston metropolitan area. The architecture is charming, and shoppable. On-street parking is affordable and there is an ample community lot with enough parking for employees and customers. It is the crown

jewel of Belmont and needs to be thoughtfully grown and protected. It is first and foremost a merchant district.

I support renovations to Belmont Center, and support the possibility of creating residential units in the Center. However, the successes and the enormous challenges of businesses in Belmont are largely ignored by the town. We feel this lack of connection in Belmont Center. I believe there is an assumption among town residents and town hall that businesses in Belmont Center are always thriving and that expanding commercial real estate will benefit everyone.

Many of the proposed changes will negatively impact the existing businesses on Leonard Street. The elimination or significant reduction of a street-level, easy-access parking lot will hurt Belmont Center. With no MBTA buses into Leonard Street, and limited all day street parking, most of the Center employees park in the Claflin lot.

I am concerned about the Town's plan to construct new mixed-use buildings. In other communities, newly constructed commercial space rents at prime rates, usually exceeding \$65/sq/ft. Most small businesses will not rent these spaces. They are often leased to national chains that can outsell existing local businesses.

I am asking for more dialogue. And I am asking for the Town to be more curious. I would like the town to engage with Belmont Center businesses about falling sales and the challenge of engaging customers (including local residents). This discussion may need to happen outside of the town forums. This conversation can look like:

- What is the going per sq/ft rate in each of the town's 3 districts?
- Do businesses in Belmont do enough dollars annually to keep their occupancy costs at a healthy 5-10% of gross revenue?
- How has the rise in property taxes affected businesses with triple-net leases?
- Have Belmont Center businesses been negatively affected by the vacancies on Leonard Street?
- Which categories of businesses in Belmont Center have seen falling sales for the last 3 years?

This is a start. The Center is full of smart, hard-working and invested business owners who are ready to engage.

Thank you.

Katherine Venzke, Owner

Helena's

Damian Letter to Paul Joy

Hi Paul,

Thanks for reaching out and for giving the local businesses a space to voice their concerns.

Really appreciate your work.

Here's the letter I sent out to the business community, most everyone touched on all the points tonight:

It's great to open up the opportunity for growth in the Center but this plan as a whole doesn't do the Center justice and puts everything we built here at risk.

To allow existing landlords to add more to their existing buildings and adjust zoning as needed would be great. If a landlord has the means to do so and sees a benefit in building up without greatly disturbing any of our businesses seems like a good thing to do. If there's really a demand in the market for such growth, it will happen naturally and likely successfully.

However, the whole piece about the town leasing or selling the Clafflin parking lot for development is really a situation where we would be putting the cart before the horse. First off, these ideas are not coming from an actual demand for more businesses, they are coming from a need for more taxes for the town. This approach is inherently backwards and not sustainable.

If landlords and developers really wanted to build more in Belmont Center then that should be abundantly clear, however the opposite is more true. The old Bank of America has been dormant for years, the old CVS spot was also dormant for some time (luckily that is changing; side note, I spoke with the previous owners on many occasions and their price to sell the building dropped almost a million dollars from the beginning). I've spoken with another landlord in town a few years ago who's had the ability to build up and increase their square footage but they said every time they entertained the idea they kept coming up with the same answer: it just doesn't make sense; and not only that, they are quite happy with the rent they are receiving as is. The demand is not there and for good reason.

Without a doubt, there will be a developer out there that will see the Clafflin lot project and want to jump on it. Unfortunately, I think such a developer would be the victim of magical thinking and we, as the neighboring businesses would pay the price. I recall meeting with the group who started that big project in Cushing Square on the corner where Starbucks is and Yours Kitchen was up to the old CVS there, we met with them before they even started demolition of that corner and they were asking \$55 a square foot +++ (was around 10 years

ago?) and today the only business I know of that is in that whole developed corner is Starbucks (maybe there's more?). So it's unclear if such a development is bringing any real value to the area and helping the tax base. Not to mention the time it took to build it. That's an example of magical thinking gone wrong. Hopefully the residential units are booked up and maybe there will be a bank in there. Developers building such projects will have rents only attainable for large chains, banks and the like (which may be good for increasing tax base but will create a different type of town).

When we talk about the "vision of Belmont", I don't think we have in mind Arsenal Yards or Assembly (just to name a few, both of which have had a ton of turn over and are migrating towards...big chains/franchises etc). Maybe I'm wrong but I don't think that's the vision for Belmont. We are a small, quaint, perfect mix of goods and services and we're truly one of a kind. I wouldn't let anyone sell us an idea that we could be (even if we wanted to be) something else (...pick whatever example you want) because we cannot be most of these other places because we're still going to be small and people will drive to Fresh Pond or Harvard Square or Cushing Square or Waverly or ... we can only be so much within our footprint. Sure add a floor here and there if landlords can fill it out and keep it rented but pretty pictures that make you think like you can cram a large development in a parking lot doesn't really fit in this town. We could easily do some low cost things to make the parking lot cool and spruce it up and draw people into the area and make it a flex space but a new development there is more likely to detract from and dilute our vision.

Parking - when we were opening The Wellington we had to go through an extra 2 rounds of permitting meetings all because the parking situation was in question (was super costly for us), so it's kind of funny how we did a 180 and we can now fit enough parking for a new complex and the existing center in the same spot and the town is cool with it. Yes they'll do another parking study, but what about the studies they already did? I also recall hearing from the town about the value of parking spaces (apparently there's good revenue from it), so I guess I'm confused as to how we became so chill with parking spots. And any parking above or below a new development in the Claffin lot would likely not be free and not be cheap, which would hinder local businesses.

Traffic - rush hour and bottlenecking at the bridge is pretty bad as it is, not sure how Claffin development would help this. Making Leonard Street one way would likely be on the table as a solution but that would again.... not be good for local businesses. Let's just face it, Belmont Center is small. It feels like we're trying to squeeze water from a stone.

Big Picture - it took Belmont Center a good 15 years to be what people see and experience

when they walk the street today and that didn't happen without lots of struggle, turnover, and empty storefronts. What we see today came together after the pandemic and amidst heavy inflation and continued rising costs across the board, so the center is quite vulnerable right now. The construction for a development in the Claflin lot would without a doubt be catastrophic to many businesses here even if it's done in phases. The town, nor our landlords, would be able to do anything worthwhile to counterbalance the effects of such a large scale project. This is not the time to add more stress to Belmont Center businesses, rather we need to do the opposite. We have a lot to offer and we'll continue to improve our product and offerings to the community. We need to continue to fill in the (still) empty spaces and get more people into the center. If the town wants to put money into promoting the awesome mix of businesses we have (and other things that make us special) rather than studies on parking spaces, we welcome this. I mean this seriously and with all due respect.

The idea of the Claflin lot being developed is in no way coming from people wanting more from the center, it's solely from an idea for expanding the tax base. This is a very unnatural way to introduce growth in the community and the local businesses will suffer as a result. It would make more sense to allow the existing landlords the option to build up if they want and with normal considerations. Which, typically it's good for a tenant to have in their lease some protections and considerations if their landlord decides to or needs to do some construction to the property, this is often a thing in our leases for good reason. However, in the case of the town opening up Claflin, we lack this.

Thank you!

Damian