

Town of Belmont Economic Development Committee (EDC)

Location: Hybrid meeting via Zoom

Tuesday January 23, 2024, 7:00 pm

Attendees:

In person: Paul Joy, Erin Brown, Jack Sy, Marie Warner

Virtual/via zoom: Wendy Etkind, Armine Humphrey, Deran Muckjian

Also in attendance: Chris Ryan

Not in attendance: Renee Guo, Schuyler Wiggin

Meeting led by Committee Chair Paul Joy

Minutes taken by Wendy Etkind

**RECEIVED
TOWN CLERK
BELMONT, MA**

DATE: February 12, 2024

TIME: 2:46 PM

1. Call to order at 7:01 pm.

2. Approval of meeting minutes

Paul and Erin reviewed the meeting minutes from the January 9, 2024 meeting.

Motion: approval of meeting minutes from the January 9 EDC meeting. Motion was approved by a vote of 5-0 (Jack and Wendy abstained).

3. Spring Zoning – Boutique Hotels – Working session and possible vote

Chris Ryan kicked off a discussion about moving forward on a recommendation for zoning for hotels with the goal of a vote at the spring Town Meeting. There was discussion about locations in town, and size of a hotel that would be aligned with the character of our town. There was discussion about the size that would support ancillary facilities within the hotel (most often restaurants). Jack shared that his restaurant in a hotel in Lexington does quite well, so this is a good business opportunity.

Paul shared his research on number of rooms in different types of hotels to give the committee a sense of scale. The Charles Hotel, which is quite large, is 294 rooms. The Lexington Inn at Hastings is 22 rooms on 2 ¼ acres, and the Colonial Inn is 54 rooms on 1 acre. Erin suggested recommending a range of rooms, Paul suggested using a by right limit where a proposed project over that limit would trigger the special permitting process.

Chris Ryan found a website that specializes in boutique hotels to help the committee shape these recommendations. He learned that they are typically between 10 and 100 rooms. He agreed that we could recommend a by right requirement to whatever size we want, and then anything over that

number of rooms would require a special permit process. He suggested that the focus be on what would get a 2/3 approval among Town Meeting, and to propose the minimum of what we want.

Paul reminded the committee that this is a recommendation to the planning board who will refine it; he said that it sounds like we are getting close to alignment. We need to agree on what types of uses, what threshold for number of rooms, and type of market.

The question was raised of whether it is worth waiting for the planned market analysis to strengthen the proposal to put in front of Town meeting?

Marie likes the idea of basing it on data but also called out that the impact of waiting would mean not putting this in front of Town Meeting this time around.

Wendy advocated not waiting for the market analysis, she said that we should move forward tonight with a recommendation and vote for the planning board, and use the market analysis data for expansion of the zoning in a future town meeting. This is an important next step in what will be a long journey. In a worst-case scenario, Town Meeting may vote “no” for this first round; if that happens we’ll use it to learn what the concerns and objections are, and refine the approach for our next recommendation.

The Select Board will make a market analysis decision by the end of February. Once approved and a project starts, it will be a 3-4 month engagement. There are 3 vendors who Chris has a quote from for the work, and funding does not come from the town.

Chris went on to say that if the planning board questions the number of rooms, we have done research to support where the recommendation comes from. We should also tie in the recommendation with restaurant by right which we’ve already passed, in most cases it should not trigger a special permit. Presenting at Town Meeting will be most meaningful if it’s represented as a comparison to other towns that are similar to ours.

To finalize the number of rooms, Chris suggested looking at the average room size of 150 square feet, and using that to approximate the recommended number of rooms. Paul then suggested we move forward on a motion and vote.

Motion to define and regulate boutique hotels in Belmont, MA as follows:

- 1. Definition: Boutique hotels, limited to 35 rooms, offering unique and personalized experiences.*
- 2. Zoning: Permitted by right in LB One and LB Two zones; other business districts subject to special permits.*
- 3. Larger Establishments: Hotels exceeding 35 rooms require a special permit.*
- 4. Purpose: Enhance tourism, support local economy, and ensure development aligns with Belmont’s character.*

Motion was approved by a vote of 7-0.

4. MBTA 3A – Mandatory Mixed Use Discussion

Paul summarized recent updates from the MBTA Advisories committee's last meeting. They reviewed the results of the second compliance run. They began to develop scenarios to narrow down the results. There will be a big meeting on Thurs focused on these scenarios. Mixed use development is part of that discussion.

Chris Ryan has put together information for mixed use scenarios for the committee's consideration. The MBTA committee hasn't discussed areas for potential mixed use, Paul asked them for guidance on this.

Chris discussed that existing commercial should be automatically considered for mixed use zoning, but MA has some contradictory policies that prevent it from being counted as residential for the MBTA 3A requirements which makes our town's job more difficult.

Wendy asked if the mixed-use discussions are looking to expanding commercial space or protecting what we have? Chris confirmed that it's the latter; Wendy advocated doing anything that we can to maintain our commercial base by approving as much mixed-use development as possible.

A motion was made by Marie: any current commercial use property should be designated as mandatory mixed use for MBTA 3A Mandate up to the maximum number of mixed-use units allowed.

Motion was approved by a vote of 7-0.

Marie asked about whether the committee should make a recommendation to cap the maximum number of units which led to a discussion of the current tiers of additional units, and what the role of the EDC might be in making such a recommendation. Chris said that there are three ways to look at the increased number of units: (1) what state requires, which is 1632; (2) MAPC recommends a 10% buffer in case the state kicks something out, which is 1796; (3) additional units based on density bonuses up to a maximum potential percentage (this could be a very high number). We need to make that last number public, so the community feels that we are being transparent. Wendy asked Marie what the EDC's role is in making residential cap recommendations and how it ties to our charge? Marie responded that it could have infrastructure impacts that negatively impact businesses. Chris said that the market analysis should address whether there is any impact on the infrastructure by the different recommendations.

5. Wayfinding – Working Group Designs and Fundraising Update

Paul asked committee members if there were updates on any discussions with the Garden Club; there were not. Marie will speak with Allison Link. The talking points are that this is a fundraising mechanism and offer them the opportunity to speak at the March fundraising event. She'll also review what the designs look like and where they'd be going.

Jack suggested that business be offered to be part of the fundraising effort, that they'd be interested in being part of it. This led to a discussion about how businesses could participate, what the support might look like, and things we'd need to think through before approaching them for funds. Residents and foundations may also want to support the effort.

Erin emphasized the importance of having the facts accurate before starting a fundraising campaign. This includes accurate costs of signs, plaque process and placement, these and other factors need to be understood clearly and communicated as part of the fundraising campaign.

Paul pulled up the approved design and shared the story of the Gardenia on the sign and how it is tied to Belmont's history and a local family. There was discussion about where plaques might go on the signs without impacting the current design.

Chris described the process of sponsoring blue highway signs that can advertise businesses.

6. Communications Lead Update

Erin led a discussion on ways to encourage registrations for our Mar 12 networking event. She's working out the issues with a new invitation process. As part of this effort, she's capturing database updates. She suggested getting together with Marie and me to clean up the database. She will do a flyer to promote the event. Deran got sponsorship from Cambridge Savings who wanted to support the event again. We discussed inviting the Select Board and candidates for Select Board to hear concerns from businesses and give them a different opportunity to hear about our work.

7. Committee Updates

- **Energy** - Paul reached out to chair to share information about a project by a private company who is re-purposing an old coal fired factory to install huge solar battery storage system. They are collecting energy and selling back to the city of Springfield where the factory is located. Paul is partnering with Marty from the Energy Committee to jointly approach the investment company and see if there could be an opportunity to propose a similar effort in Belmont. They will also use it to better understand what they built there, and if there was any kind of impact to the community.

8. Current State of Business in Belmont

Belmont Center:

- There's been no traction on filling the vacant storefronts in the Center.
- Butternut Bakehouse has been doing well so far.

Other districts:

- Cushing Square – Want List records just did a soft opening at 113 Trapelo Rd (The Blue Butterfly's old location). They moved here from Newton.
- Cushing's barbershop has new ownership.
- The new prospect to fill Aram's Café is stalled – Armine expressed that she knows somebody who's interested in that space.
- Bakehaus is expanding to the space next door.
- Yumbunnies is looking for a new space, in case anybody has connections.

- Erin would really like to know if there's anything we can do to move things forward with the Bradford – it's been years. The last time she asked, several years ago, Adam Dash had said there's nothing the town can do, it's in private litigation. Paul shared that there was a meeting last week with Town Administration and Toll Brothers who gave an update on the lawsuit status. There will be a potential trial in late 2025/ early 2026. Ms Dionne was adamant about becoming more business friendly and Toll Brothers is aware of changes we're making, including rezoning and this has caught their attention which they will hopefully share.

9. Meeting Scheduling – Feb 2024, including annual goal-setting and SB presentation (possible Feb 26)

Next meeting: February 7, which will be a goal-setting session and to finalize the report for the Select Board. Paul is waiting to hear from the Select Board on the date for the joint presentation to set any additional Feb meetings. Paul will send out accomplishments and last year's goals. We can update those and suggest new ones. Erin suggested two tracks – how to support current businesses and how to encourage new business. Chris suggested tying our work to helping with the Economic Development Section of the Town's Master Plan which is a potential initiative for 2024.

10. Public comment / Other business

No public comments.

11. Adjourned at 9:00 pm.