

# Town of Belmont Economic Development Committee (EDC)

Location: Hybrid meeting in Conference Room 4, Town Hall and via Zoom

Thursday March 28, 2024, 7:00 pm

## Attendees

In person: Paul Joy, Wendy Etkind, Jack Sy

Virtual/via zoom: Armine Humphrey (until 8:07pm), Deran Muckjian, Marie Warner

Also in attendance: Chris Ryan, Elizabeth Dionne

Not in attendance: Erin Brown, Renee Guo, Schuyler Wiggin

Meeting led by Committee Chair Paul Joy

Minutes taken by Wendy Etkind

**RECEIVED  
TOWN CLERK  
BELMONT, MA**

DATE: June 17, 2024

TIME: 8:47 AM

### **1. Call to order at 7:02 pm.**

### **2. Update on Community Path Project**

Bonnie Friedman joined the EDC via zoom to give an overview of the Community Path project to the members who are newer to the committee as well as an update on the progress since we last met. Things are progressing on phase one, however details around the tunnel slowed the approvals and process down. Elizabeth Dionne shared that we expect the tunnel portion to be done in November 2025.

Wendy asked about the progress of phase 2 and they are in ongoing discussions about what the route will be and the need for a tunnel which makes things more complicated.

Marie asked about whether there is any eminent domain in Phase 1? Bonnie confirmed that there are no permanent takings, although some temporary space may be needed during construction.

Paul asked how the recent public forum went. Bonnie said that the Beech Street center was 2/3 of the way filled which was a very good turnout. There were some residents in attendance who were resistant, and when they learned more about the project they became supportive.

### **3. Approval of meeting minutes**

Wendy reviewed the meeting minutes from the March 7, 2024 meeting.

*Motion: approval of meeting minutes from the March 7 EDC meeting. Motion was approved by a vote of 5-0 (Jack abstained).*

### **4. Election of 2024-25 Officers (Chair, Vice Chair, Secretary, Communications Coordinator)**

Paul opened the discussion by letting the committee know that Erin has decided not to renew her term, so there is an opportunity for a member to become the Communications Lead, and there will be at least one seat to recruit for.

Deran has been on the committee for 4 years and will decide by our next meeting whether he will renew. He may take on expanding the Belmont Center Business Association to becoming a town-wide business association.

Paul opened a discussion about nominations for Chair for 2024-2025. Deran expressed his hope that Paul will stay on as chair, Jack commended Paul's leadership and seconded the hope that Paul will continue. Marie enthusiastically hopes Paul will stay on and continue his leadership. She will continue to serve on the Economic Development Committee. Armine expressed similar sentiments about Paul continuing as Chair. Wendy appreciates Paul's communications across other boards and committees, and the accomplishments under his leadership. Paul accepted the recommendation to remain as Chair and thanked the members.

*Motion: Nomination of Paul Joy to continue as Chair of the Economic Development Committee. Motion was approved by a vote of 6-0.*

Paul complimented the work that Wendy has done as the committee's Secretary. Her involvement keeps people informed of our work, she promptly distributes the meeting minutes, she keeps our committee on track, and he cited her hard work in the role. Other members expressed their appreciation for Wendy's service to the committee over the past years.

*Motion: Nomination of Wendy Etkind to continue as Secretary of the Economic Development Committee. Motion was approved by a vote of 6-0.*

Paul and Chris then reviewed responsibilities and availability of the Vice Chair and Communications Lead positions. Chris said that the typical Vice Chair responsibilities are to be a sounding board for chair, meet with staff, stand in to serve as chair if the chair is unavailable. It's not a heavy lift and is a very valuable role. The Communications Lead maintains the database, runs the networking events, leads outreach and communication with businesses.

No interest was expressed in the positions among members in attendance. Paul will revisit the discussion when we have a full committee meeting, and potentially open it up to new members.

Deran asked if anyone has expressed interest in joining our committee. Paul said he hasn't started recruiting; he's waiting to see the outcome of the election before starting. The SB gives weighting to appointment recommendations from chairs of committees.

## **5. MBTA Status Update to the EDC**

Chris provided an update on the MBTA Advisories Committee's progress on the 3A project. At the last meeting there were 2 plans being considered, on Monday the committee will vote to approve

one of the plans which will go to the planning board. He highlighted the commercial areas in the plans, and is reviewing to prevent any displacement of commercial use. The town has hired an architectural firm who can help with the technical aspects of zoning.

He opened it up to questions from the committee.

Deran asked about the Claflin St parking lot which is desperately needed by the businesses in the center. Chris confirmed that it is a town-owned property which makes it ineligible. The Belmont Light Building is also ineligible; this led to a brief discussion about redevelopment of that property which is years away.

Wendy asked which direction towards our goal of increasing the commercial base this plan moves us. Chris confirmed it's moving us in the right direction and is not intended to remove any commercial space. Mixed use goes where there's existing commercial, and some areas not yet approved for commercial would be zoned differently.

Deran asked about timetables for when construction could begin. Chris said not much will happen right away. It starts with zoning, then any development would be based on the market, interest rates, what kind of space is in demand, other related factors. Development could accelerate if interest rates drop, combined with the current need for housing in the metro Boston area.

Jack asked for clarity between zoning bylaw changes and this 3A project. Elizabeth answered; these are parallel tracks. 3A is by the state and is about complying with the law, and provide housing opportunities in our town. This initiative is the first part of the major zoning bylaw rewrite which is a Town of Belmont effort.

Armine asked whether there any tie-in between the elections and the 3A? Elizabeth responded that MBTA is a state mandate and is independent of the state and local election. Our goal is to comply with the state law, and Town Meeting will be able to vote on this at the end of the year.

Marie asked whether there are different mandates for affordable housing? Chris answered that today affordable housing needs a special permit. The MBTA Communities requirements do not allow projects to require a special permit. We'll need to either eliminate the special permit or put in place the right approvals for any projects driven by this. These will go in front of Town Meeting.

**Public comment: Jonah from Cushing Square (no last name given) asked:** It sounds like we did make mistakes; what are we doing to get Cushing Square back on track? Elizabeth clarified her comment which was about the amount of time it took to get positive business outcome. Paul answered what specifically was being done in and around Cushing Sq for the 3A initiative. Jonah recommended that the electric bus line should qualify; Paul described the requirements in the process around these definitions and what is/ isn't included.

## **6. Finalization: EDC Goal-Setting for 2024-2025**

Paul proposed that we hold off on this topic until we get the results of the election coming up on Tuesday. The outcome of the election in two key areas - the new Select Board candidate and the override - could impact our focus in this area.

Elizabeth apologized that the Select Board was unable to get a joint EDC-SB meeting on the agenda to present our 2023 accomplishments. Once the dust settles with the new Select Board member, she offered a feedback loop where the SB can tie into our 2024 goal-setting. We've done a great job of moving in the same direction in the past year and she wants to continue this alignment and momentum.

The committee agreed to wait and discuss this agenda topic in our next meeting.

## **7. April/ May Discussion on Belmont Permitting**

Chris gave an overview of future direction that the committee can consider for ways to improve our permitting process and offered to lead future discussions on this topic.

Chris can explain how each function (boards and town employees) can facilitate and/or slow down starting a business, getting a permit, etc. He offered to put together a presentation for our committee which will take him about 3 weeks.

The initiatives discussed so far are hotel zoning and signs. What are other things that businesses find onerous from a boards and commissions perspective? Are there more than the four that we've already identified? Other towns have a business liaison to help with these discussions which we don't have. There are plenty of big ideas, what is the incremental work to get there.

Jack shared what he's seen in other towns and how they operate more efficiently than what he's found in Belmont. Chris suggested establishing a development review committee; there's currently a restaurant review committee and he suggests extending it. The purpose of this committee would be to meet regularly, regardless of whether there's an application; if there's no application the goal would be to discuss ideas for improvements in process.

Jack reinforced that the frequency (weekly) is important and aligning members that their goal is to facilitate the steps to open a new business, which includes staff from the town. Elizabeth shared that Patrice is very much in favor of doing things faster, smarter, better. She agreed there would need to be clarity on the goal and that the purpose is to make things easier and not harder. Include representatives from the building, fire, police, health, planning departments all in the room together to work through any open questions. Melrose does this really well and is seen as being very pro-business.

We also discussed the idea of the Select Board running a summit to align the town's goals with the various committees.

## 8. Key Questions - Wayfinding

Last meeting, we decided not to move forward on wayfinding because it hadn't yet had a chance to be discussed with the Select Board. There are a number of questions that we need answers to before approaching the Garden Club or residents for any fundraising. For example, we'd need to discuss implementation and maintenance with the DPW staff. We'd also want to confirm whether we could expand utilization of the signs beyond the Trapelo corridor which they were designated for. Marie suggested tying in efforts with the bike path once it's ready. Deran asked about business sponsorship; Paul followed up on this and confirmed that it can work well on the signage where it fits and this isn't a concern.

## 9. Communications Lead Update – Spring Networking, Town Day

Erin was not in attendance, so Paul led this topic.

### Networking event

All agreed that it was a great night. It was exciting to connect the schools to our town's business, see political candidates talking amongst themselves and with businesses, and for us to have the chance to connect with businesses in our town. Amy Kirsch took names of businesses who were interested in the WBLA program, there were at least 5 of them including Champions who wasn't even there! Great event, delicious food, businesses welcomed the opportunity. People see the value of these events and want them to continue in the future. The committee members all expressed thanks to Jack for hosting. Jack said that he was excited to see his space used for this kind of event.

### Town Day

We do want to participate again this year. The question was asked whether the Select Board Office will have a table? Yes they will for the entire time, and the SB members will take 2 hour shifts.

Deran shared that there are some sponsorship issues and he is in the process of trying to find somebody else who will do a full sponsorship which is about \$10K. With a single sponsor, all accolades go to one place.

We'll use our April and early May meetings to discuss content and logistics for our Town Day table.

## 10. Committee Updates

- **Planning Board** – Major focus right now is on the MBTA initiative, causing hotel bylaw discussions to push to Fall's Town Meeting. They are committed to this and there have been multiple discussions where they faced challenges around how to define them, where do they go, other related topics; they ran out of time to have the public forums.
- **Vision 21** – They are exploring moving forward on an empty storefront bylaw. Paul and Taylor are writing a joint letter to the Belmont Citizens Forum on this. Deran said that landlords tend to forget about properties until they're rented (trash, dirty storefronts), which drives him crazy. He thinks there should be a penalty if owners don't maintain vacant properties.

## **11. Current State of Business in Belmont**

Belmont Center:

- Paul talked with the realtor of CVS and Bank of America; the owner has decided to take them off the market for an undetermined amount of time due to no viable offers. Chris had a conversation with the owner of the bank, which is a drive-thru, and asked if there was interest in leasing to a Dunkin Donuts? There was not. He talked with the CVS owner's daughter who has a strong interest in changing the zoning via the MBTA Communities program. Chris explained the difficulties and suggested she write a letter to the MBTA advisory committee advocating her position.
- Two new businesses are coming to the center! Society Beauty Bar will open next to The Toy Shop, and a nail salon will go where Starbucks and Coco was.

Other districts: no updates

## **12. Meeting Scheduling**

Next meetings: April 11, April 25 confirmed. May 16 tentatively. Paul will be away for a month mid-June to mid-July.

## **13. Public comment**

Jonah [no last name given] from Precinct 6 stayed for the full meeting, and Paul asked him for his thoughts and feedback. He said that there seems to be broad support for zoning and building up a tax base. An idea that resonated with him is the idea of having a business handbook; this is huge and would really help. There would be up front labor to get it established, and it will deliver value. What we're working on is in the right direction. Recently moved from Jamaica Plain where they were able to build nice residences on top of an existing business successfully, which may be an approach that could be used for construction in Belmont Center. He's interested in getting more involved in the town and we advocated that he consider applying. 😊

## **14. Adjourned at 9:14 pm.**