

Belmont Citizens Forum

Vol. 2, No. 6

A Newsletter for Belmont Residents

November 2001

Firehouses Badly Need Repair or Replacement

By Sharon Vanderslice

To say that Belmont's fire stations are held together with duct tape and glue would be no exaggeration. Maintenance on these buildings, located on Leonard Street, Trapelo Road, and Fairview Ave., has been deferred for so many years that the firefighters have had to use whatever materials they could scrounge up to keep the stations habitable.

Eight-inch chunks of horsehair plaster are falling out of the walls. Floors are buckling and tiles are peeling up. Paint is shriveling. Windows are leaking. Some of the furniture looks as if it was recently rescued from the sidewalk. And this is just the cosmetic stuff.

There are pipes rusting out, slates falling off the roof, and gaps under the main doors that allow snow to blow in during the winter and skunks to sneak in during the summer.

Rattly windows are held open and closed with an assortment of shims, matchbook covers, packing tape, and, in one case, a pool cue. Fire Chief William Osterhaus says one of his firefighters was injured and unable to work for three weeks after a window collapsed on top of him. And because the outside brickwork has not been repointed in decades, the buildings routinely flood any time there is a heavy rain. During one storm, the computer network equipment at the Belmont Center headquarters was completely disabled by rainwater. The firefighters had to take out the components and bake them in an oven for an hour in order to get the system working again.

What is even more alarming is that the wiring

in the stations is so out-of-date that, Osterhaus said, if he encountered it during an inspection of a privately owned building, he'd have to cite the owner for code violations. A recent tour revealed exposed wires hanging out of a box in the cellar and extension cords draped under sinks in the bathrooms.

The firefighters staff these stations around the clock, working 24-hour shifts, and the living conditions are decidedly substandard. Soot from the diesel engines covers the downstairs walls, and fumes rise to the upper floors where the firefighters sleep and eat. The kitchen at the Waverley station was cobbled together by firefighters who hauled

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Environmental Events Calendar

Friends of Spy Pond Park Annual Meeting. The guest speaker will be a representative of the company chosen to do the Spy Pond Park renovations.

Sunday, December 2. Potluck dinner at 6 p.m. The meeting follows at 7 p.m. Location: 20 Hamilton Road, Apartment 401 (Spy Pond Condos). For information, call (781) 648-0630.

The Role of the Urban Forest in the Mystic River Watershed. A talk by Thomas Brady, Conservation Administrator/TreeWarden for the Town of Brookline and President of the Massachusetts Tree Wardens & Foresters Association. Brady will discuss how construction activity adversely effects the forest and simple steps that can be taken to ensure the health of the urban forest for the next generation. **Wednesday, December 5 at 7:30 p.m.** Woburn City

Hall, City Council Chambers. Sponsored by Mystic River Watershed Association. For information, contact Janet at (781) 316-3438 or jskovnr@gis.net

Winter Walk through the Western Greenway. Join Roger Wrubel, Director of Habitat, a Massachusetts Audubon Society sanctuary in Belmont, for a 3.25-mile trek through Habitat, the McLean Hospital property, Rock Meadow, the Metropolitan State Hospital land, and the Olympus Hospital grounds in Waltham. The greenway comprises over a thousand acres of wetlands, meadows, and forests. **Saturday, January 19, 9 a.m. to 12:30 p.m.** The walk will leave from Habitat Wildlife Sanctuary, 10 Juniper Road, Belmont. Space is limited and reservations are required. \$20 per person. Please register by phone at (617) 489-5050.

Belmont Citizens Forum Officers and Trustees

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Belmont Citizens Forum, Inc. is a not-for-profit organization that strives to maintain the small-town atmosphere of Belmont, Massachusetts, by preserving its natural and historical resources, limiting traffic growth, and enhancing pedestrian safety. We do this by keeping residents informed about planning and zoning issues, by participating actively in public hearings, and by organizing forums on key subjects.

Our newsletter is published six times a year (January, March, May, July, September, and November). Published material represents the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the Belmont Citizens Forum.

Letters to the editor may be sent to
P. O. Box 609, Belmont MA 02478.

Help Needed

Events / Hospitality Committee

Help put on public meetings of the Belmont Citizens Forum – like the bi-monthly Friends meetings and periodic regional forums by arranging refreshments, making sure people sign in, handing out literature, etc.

Publicity Committee

Help get out the word about coming events by making and putting up posters, putting up sandwich boards, sending out press releases, etc. All sorts of talents needed: art and writing; walking around asking merchants to accept posters; and the heavy lifting of setting up the sandwich boards around town.

Please call Sue Bass at 617 489 4729 or e-mail her at MerrFilms@aol.com

Bike Paths Approach Belmont on Three Sides

By John Dieckmann

A Belmont bikeway, originally planned as part of the larger Wayside Rail Trail, was first proposed in 1994. But when the town of Weston opted out of that trail in 1997, and the financial woes of the “Big Dig” began to crowd out funding for other transportation projects, it appeared to some that all hope for a bikeway in Belmont was lost. Recent developments in neighboring communities, however, may provide a more hospitable environment in which to move the bikeway project forward. Here is what’s happening elsewhere:

Watertown. State funding to construct the Watertown Bike Path, sometimes called the Watertown Branch Rail Trail, has just been approved. This path connects Grove Street (near the intersection with Arlington Street) to Arsenal Street (near the intersection with School Street), along that stretch of the abandoned railroad right-of-way that passes the east side of Fresh Pond and the west side of the Mt. Auburn Star Market. It then runs parallel to Arlington and Arsenal Streets before reaching Watertown Square. The overall length is 1.3 miles. The estimated cost of this 12-foot-wide paved bikeway is \$100,000 for design and \$1 million for construction. (This will be paid for by a \$400,000 HUD

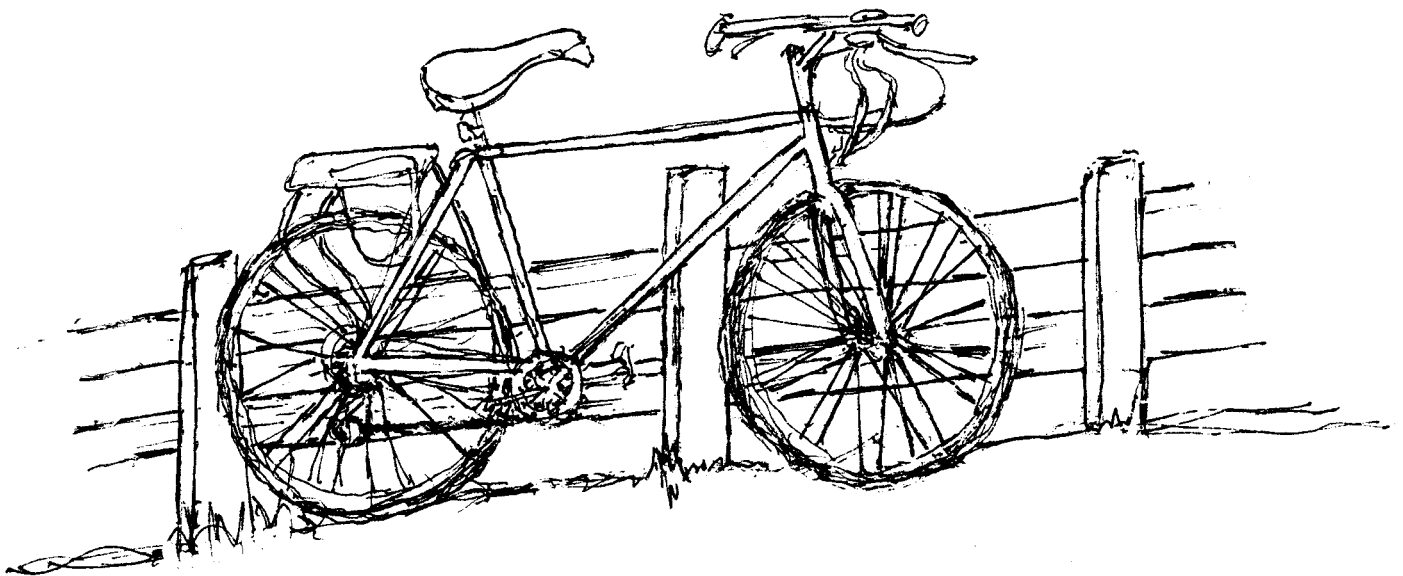
grant, with the balance coming from state transportation funds.) The design phase will be completed in 2002, and the path itself could be completed as early as the end of 2003.

Cambridge. The MDC has constructed a path with a rock dust surface between the Alewife T station and Brighton Street, on the north side of the commuter rail tracks, and is now discussing the possibility of paving this stretch of the bikeway. The Belmont Bikeway would continue west from the Brighton Street end of the path.

Waltham. The Waltham City Council recently voted to proceed with development of its portion of the Wayside Rail Trail, independent of what other towns may decide.

Wayland and Sudbury. The Bay Circuit Alliance recently secured permission to establish a hiking and mountain biking trail (unpaved and unfunded, for now) along the Wayland and Sudbury portions of the Wayside Rail Trail route. This stretch will become a permanent part of the Bay Circuit Trail, making it part of the Bay Circuit regional greenway. Once that route is established, it could later be upgraded to a paved bike path in the future.

continued on next page



Bike Paths, continued from page 3

All of these projects should encourage us to move forward with the Belmont Bikeway portion of the Wayside Rail Trail.

The Wayside trail was designed to follow the abandoned right-of-way of the Central Massachusetts Rail Line for 26 miles, from Alewife through Belmont, Waltham, Weston, Wayland, Sudbury, and Hudson, ending in Berlin. Modeled after the Minuteman Bikeway in Arlington, Lexington, and Bedford, the new bikeway would benefit many Belmont residents. It could be used extensively for recreation — biking, jogging, roller blading, walking — and as an alternate commuter route, thereby removing some of the traffic from our local streets. At the Alewife end, the bike path would connect directly to the T station and the eastern end of the Minuteman Bikeway.

Bikeway committees in each town along the Wayside route developed preliminary plans and held public meetings during the late 1990s. The Belmont meetings took place in the summer of 1997. There was broad public support for the bikeway, although a number of Channing Road abutters to the commuter rail line expressed opposition, fearing a loss of privacy in their backyards. In 1998, the Belmont Board of Selectman voted to initiate the detailed design phase of the project to address the many necessary routing details. It was at this point that Weston opted out of the Wayside trail, Big Dig costs soared, and the project began to lose its momentum.

In order to move ahead on the Belmont bikeway

now, the town must first decide on a viable route, one for which all the necessary land, or permanent easements to use the land, can be acquired. The traditional rails-to-trails method, in which an abandoned rail right-of-way is transferred from a state agency, may not be available here. Although the right-of-way west of Waltham has been inactive since 1971, the commuter rail in Belmont remains in use, and the MBTA has not been overly receptive to sharing its rail bed with a bikeway. Parallel routes are possible, however. To cover the distance from Brighton Street to Belmont Center, a combination of Channing Road and high school land close to the railroad tracks might be used. In this case, a bike and pedestrian tunnel under the tracks at Alexander Avenue would be necessary. Such a tunnel would also address a long-term need for a direct walking route between the Winn Brook neighborhood and the high school. Most of the distance from Belmont Center to Waverley Square could be covered by an easement on the McLean land along Pleasant Street, already provided for by the McLean rezoning in 1998. A suitable route over, around, or through Belmont Center still needs to be identified.

Once a viable route and the means to obtain ownership or easements to the land in question are agreed upon, the town can apply for rails-to-trails funding to cover design and construction costs. Senator Warren Tolman's office has played an active role in moving the Watertown Bike Path forward and is willing to work with Belmont after a route is chosen.

John Dieckmann is a Pct. 3 Town Meeting Member.

Support the Belmont Bikeway.

A group is forming to try to reinvigorate and support the planning process for the Belmont Bikeway portion of the Wayside Rail Trail. At key junctures, members will be asked, primarily via group email, to demonstrate public support for the bikeway by writing, calling, or emailing public officials. If you would like to join the group, please fill out and mail the reply form on this page to Belmont Bikeway Support Group c/o John Dieckmann, 47 Lorimer Road, Belmont MA 02478.. In the near future, a meeting will be called for those willing to serve on the organization's board of directors.

Name _____

Address _____

email _____

Phone _____

____ Check here if you are willing to serve on the board. (This requires 2 to 3 brief meetings per year.)

Bonds Used to Finance Town's Capital Projects

By Mary Webb

With several large building projects in the offing, Belmont will soon be in the financial marketplace as an issuer of municipal bonds to cover the costs of making the town's plans a reality. In a recent interview, Town Treasurer Ernest Fay described how he makes sure Belmont has the needed funds when the bills come due.

He used the example of the nearly completed Athletic Complex at the Belmont High School to trace the steps he takes to raise the funds. "In November 2000 the Town Meeting approved a request for \$75,000 for a preliminary plan for the complex," he recalled. "That's when I knew that, before the fiscal year ended in June 2001, Belmont would need to borrow the money."

The Useful BAN

The mechanism for funding such a small part of a project's total cost is a short-term security called a Bond Anticipation Note (BAN). A BAN allows a town to borrow for a relatively short time, up to five years with annual renewals. The town makes regular interest payments while the BAN is in force and must begin making repayments of principal in the third year.

The cost to the town for such borrowing is low. Commercial banks and financial organizations charge low interest rates for BANs because their money is not at risk for a long time, and the notes are backed

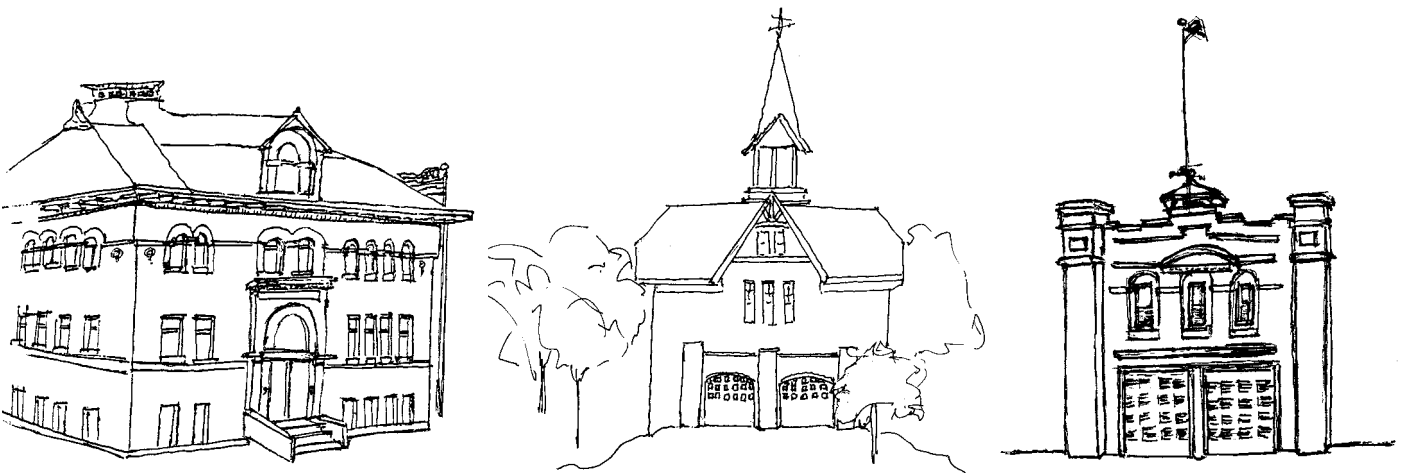
by the credit of the issuing municipality. For investors, short time spans and low risk translate to lower rates of return.

"Belmont's credit is excellent," Fay said. Moody's, a bond-rating agency, gives Belmont's long-term bonds its highest ranking, Aaa, based on its assessment of the town's ability to pay its debts. The ranking agency takes into consideration a town's per capita income, employment statistics, total tax burden, and other measures of financial health. For a short-term note such as a BAN, the highest rank is expressed as a rating of MIG 1.

"As soon as Town Meeting approves an expenditure, we can get a project under way using any cash we have on hand and then issuing a BAN to cover the approved funding," Fay said. In the case of the Athletic Complex, Fay issued a BAN for \$75,000 on June 13, 2001 at an interest rate of 3.29%. It was due to mature and be repaid in three months, September 13, 2001.

By the date the three-month note was issued, Fay knew that Belmont would need \$2.2 million to complete the Athletic Complex, in accord with the town-wide vote. In August he negotiated a BAN for that amount at a rate of close to 2.6%, due to mature in August 2002.

"When the three-month BAN matured in September, I had more than one option," he said. "I could pay off the principal and retire the note or I could refinance the loan." He decided to issue another BAN, with an interest rate of 3.08%, due to mature in August 2002 on the same date *continued*



Bonds, *continued from page 5*

as the \$2.2 million BAN he had issued in August.

“Next August, when both BANs mature, I will probably have other BANs with the same due date. At that point, with at least \$5 million in BANs, it may be worthwhile to issue a long-term municipal bond.” According to Fay, the costs to the town of issuing a long-term municipal bond for less than \$4.5 million are too great. “For smaller amounts, BANs make more sense.”

Municipal Bonds

A municipal bond is more costly to negotiate than a BAN because it is a more complex financial instrument. A BAN is basically a transaction between the town and a single institutional lender such as a bank. A municipal bond may be purchased by a large financial firm that will subsequently offer it to the public. For that reason, a municipal bond comes under greater regulatory scrutiny and requires a more elaborate issuing process.

For example, Fay described a loan of \$4.857 million that Belmont negotiated in September 2000, called the 2000 Bond. It was intended to cover a number of projects, including new computer technology for the schools, a new electric light building, a ladder truck for the fire department, and plans for the new cemetery and the Town Hall Annex.

A Bond Auction

A municipal bond is offered in the financial marketplace through an auction in which large firms are the bidders. Their bids reflect the interest rates they require Belmont to pay for the loan over a period of eight to ten years or more. In a bond auction, low bidders win.

To offer a municipal bond, a town creates a prospectus; that is, a document describing the date and place of the auction, the provisions of the loan, and the functions and responsibilities of various legal and financial organizations representing the town during the transaction.

While bringing the bond to market, the town engages the services of legal and financial counsel and must negotiate with the banks and other financial companies that underwrite, or guarantee, the loan, keep the books on the transaction, and physically

hold the bond certificates. As Fay noted, “All the costs of these services and relationships are included in the cost to Belmont of borrowing the money.” The interest rate alone may be as much as 2% higher than the rate on a BAN issued at the same time.

A quick look at the summary page of the prospectus of the 2000 Bond shows that it is officially titled the “\$4,857,000 General Obligation Bond Municipal Purpose Loan of 2000 Bonds.” Further, the loan is divided into a series of bonds, each with a specific principal amount, and each due on September 1 of the years from 2001 through 2010.

A general obligation municipal bond (GOB) is a bond issued by a local government and backed by the town’s financial strength and taxing power. Specifically, the 2000 Bond is “payable from the taxes that may be levied upon all property in the town.”

Potential investors in one of the bonds in the series can learn from the prospectus the interest rate each bond offers. They can also determine that the bonds are not callable; that is, they will not be redeemed before the maturity dates stated in the prospectus, so investors can be assured of receiving the stream of interest payments they are counting on.

From an investor’s point of view, the particular appeal of a municipal bond is that it is tax advantaged. The income received from a municipal bond is not federally taxed, and Massachusetts, like most states, exempts interest from its own state and local bonds.

Mary Webb is a resident of Belmont.

Networking Picnic at Beaver Brook Reservation.

Top right, the Spirit of Spy Pond greets a visitor during a skit performed by the Friends of Spy Pond Park. Right, Sue Bass, President of the Belmont Citizens Forum, welcomes guests at the potluck buffet.

Networking Picnic Draws Crowd to the Park

About 50 environmentalists from Arlington, Belmont, Cambridge, Waltham, and Watertown spent a sunny afternoon in the MDC's Beaver Brook reservation on September 23, chatting and munching at a regional networking potluck picnic sponsored by the Belmont Citizens Forum. The purpose was for people who are working on the same issues to meet and find ways to work together.

The groups represented were Alewife Neighbors of North Cambridge; the Alewife Coalition; the Arlington League of Women Voters; the Bay Circuit Trail; the Belmont Land Trust; the Friends of Alewife Reservation; the Friends of Spy Pond Park, who put on a wonderful skit about the spirit of Spy Pond; the McLean Open Space Alliance; the Mystic River Watershed Association; the Waltham Council of Neighborhood Advocates; the Waltham Land Trust; and Watertown Citizens for Environmental Safety.

We were also grateful for the attendance of Rep. Anne Paulsen of Belmont, Waltham City Councilor Mike Squillante, Belmont Selectman Will Brownsberger, a representative of state Sen. Steve Tolman, and the manager of Beaver Brook reservation, the MDC's Rob McArthur.

— Sue Bass



Neglected for Decades, Fire Stations Need To

Continued from page 1

discarded cabinets out of the rubbish because the town could not afford to pay for new ones. None of the bath or shower rooms are ventilated, and there are no showers for women, which the department must have before it can hire female firefighters.

Care of the firefighting equipment has been compromised too. For example, the firefighters' jackets, boots, and other turnout gear, which costs \$1600 per person, lasts only half as long as it should because it has to be hung next to hot radiators and is constantly exposed to diesel exhaust. Ultraviolet light from nearby windows also causes the fabrics to deteriorate rapidly.

One of the two hose towers (the narrow, three-story towers where hoses are hung to dry) is unusable due to a faulty ladder. This means that the department's fire engines must routinely drive to Belmont Center to hang up and retrieve their hoses.

Modern Equipment Does Not Fit

Because two of the stations were originally designed for horse-drawn wagons, they have trouble accommodating modern apparatus. In some cases, fire engines have only two inches of clearance going in and out of the doors. This summer, fifty support columns had to be hastily installed in the cellar of the Waverley Station to keep the fire trucks from



Be Relocated and Consolidated, Chief Says

falling through the ceiling.

Conditions long ago passed what might be called inconvenient; they are now downright dangerous. Osterhaus explains that minor maintenance has frequently been delayed, or done as cheaply as possible, with the understanding that funding for major renovations would soon be forthcoming. Needless to say, such funding has never materialized.

On November 5, Belmont Town Meeting voted to spend \$60,000 to install portable exhaust removal systems in each station. But this is only a drop in the fire bucket. It is clear that major renovations or relocations are required—and soon. “This can’t wait any longer, in my opinion,” said Osterhaus.

Reduced Staffing Calls For Fewer Stations

For safety reasons, he has no choice but to consolidate his staff at two stations. Staffing has been reduced since 1981 from nineteen to eleven on-duty at any given time. This includes five firefighters, two emergency medical technicians (who are also firefighters), three lieutenants, and a captain—not enough to adequately staff the existing three stations. Federal standards require that at least four firefighters be on site before entering a burning building, yet he currently has just two on staff at the Harvard Lawn station on Fairview Avenue near the Cambridge border. There’s not much they can do, he admits, until backup arrives from elsewhere.

This past year, the selectmen appointed a consolidation committee to study possible sites for new fire stations and make recommendations to the town. The committee’s first choice, presented at a public hearing on October 18, was to abandon the three existing stations and build two new ones, one on the Claflin Street parking lot behind Belmont Center and the other on the Cushing Square municipal lot off Trapelo Road. This decision was made partly on the basis of response time. Osterhaus says the goal is to be able to get a fire engine anywhere in town in four minutes or less, from wheel start to wheel stop. Allowing a minute and a half for call-taking and dispatch plus one minute of turnout time (the time it takes the firefighters to don their gear and get on the trucks), that means a home should be reached six

and one-half minutes from the time a call is placed to 911.

But Belmont business owners are strongly opposed to the recommended sites because they worry about the loss of public parking at the town’s municipal lots. Former Selectman Stephen Rosales, who recently moved his law firm to Cushing Square, said he figured one parking space could be worth as much \$72,800 in revenue to a business owner over the course of a year. If 50 spaces are lost, that could add up to \$3.6 million in lost business, he said. Steve Savarese, owner of Century 21 Adams in Cushing Square and the chairman of the Belmont Chamber of Commerce, said that a loss of spaces in municipal lots would force more people to park on residential streets. These comments were echoed by Belmont Center business owners. Kevin Foley of Locatelli Realty Trust said his grandfather built the main business block on the east side of Leonard Street and sold or donated the land on which the municipal lot now sits, expressly for the purpose of providing parking in the center. “Once you place a fire station [there], you close off options,” Foley said. He said nothing had been done to add parking since the 1940s. Former Selectman Bill Skelley, a business owner in Cushing Square, said he agrees that the sites of the fire stations need to change, but that taking away parking “would be a major step backward.”

Alternative Sites Considered

Since the October hearing, Town Meeting has allocated \$50,000 for a detailed study of other potential fire station sites. When asked at Town Meeting which sites were being considered, Selectman Bill Monahan said some possible combinations were (1) a station at the VFW site on Trapelo Road and a station between Claflin and Cross Streets in Belmont Center, and (2) a station on Pleasant Street, somewhere between Concord Avenue and Trapelo Road (possibly on the existing police station site), with a second station at Harvard Lawn. Regionalization is also a possibility.

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Fire Stations, *continued from page 9*

Any loss of parking spots in Belmont Center would be more than made up for by the construction of a one-story parking deck on the town's Alexander Avenue lot, fire station committee members have said. If the VFW site is chosen, the town would relocate the veterans' meeting place.

Assistant Fire Chief David Frizzell said that the Fire Department has advocated the VFW and Claflin sites for two years now, but it does not endorse the police station or Harvard Lawn sites because they would not meet the department's needs. From Harvard Lawn, he said, the department can reach only 25% of the town in a reasonable period of time, whereas a new station at the VFW site would actually improve engine company response times to the Harvard Lawn area.

Preliminary cost estimates, provided by Donham & Sweeney, Inc., as part of a town-financed feasibility study, are in the area of \$12-13 million to build two new stations. Fire Station Committee member Robert McLaughlin said that if the current stations are sold, they could bring in about \$3 million, money that could be used toward the cost of new ones. Alternatively, renovation of

the existing three stations would cost about \$8.5 million.

Old Stations Are Worth Saving

Some residents feel that whether the old stations are kept or sold, efforts should be made to save them from demolition. An architectural survey of the town conducted by Boston University in 1982 identified the Belmont Center and Waverley stations as architecturally significant. The Waverley station, on the corner of Waverley Street and Trapelo Road, was built in 1873 as a schoolhouse in the Victorian Gothic style. In fact, it was the original Daniel Butler School. It was converted to a fire station in 1906 and, according to Richard Cheek, co-chair of the Belmont Historic District Commission, "an incredible Art Deco doorway (molded from concrete) was added in the 1930s," resulting in "an amalgam of styles that is perhaps unique." BU reported that the exterior was in very good condition in 1982.

The Belmont Center station, constructed in 1899 in the Colonial Revival style, originally contained one horse-drawn hook-and-ladder truck and stalls for four horses. In keeping with historical precedent, the hose tower was designed to look like a campanile or bell tower. The hay loft on the second floor was converted to sleeping quarters in 1921. Cheek describes this station as "one of the most distinctive buildings in the center," and says it would function "like a giant billboard" for whatever company might own it in the future.

The Historic District Commission would like to place these two buildings on the National Register of Historic Places and is currently organizing the effort to do so. Although such a designation would not prevent demolition, it would make each building eligible for a preservation grant from the Massachusetts Historical Commission if it were retained by the town and, if sold privately, would offer tax incentives for commercial redevelopment.

Meanwhile, Chief Osterhaus is keeping plenty of duct tape on hand as he awaits the results of the next fire station study. "I'll be retired before these stations get built," he said, "but it's important for me to get this done for the people who come after me."

Sharon Vanderslice is a Town Meeting Member.

"Old Buildings, New Uses: Preserving Belmont's Historic Fire Stations"

Don't miss this presentation by Richard Cheek,
historic landscape photographer and
co-chair of Belmont's Historic District Commission.

Lively discussion to follow.

Mulled cider and cookies served. Sponsored by
Friends of the Belmont Citizens Forum.

Wednesday, December 5, 7:30 p.m.
Bramhall Room, All Saints Church
At the corner of Clark & Common Streets

Alewife: How Other Towns Have Opposed Excessive Development in the Floodplain

By Aram Hollman

On November 7, Belmont Town Meeting voted down a proposal to rezone the Belmont Uplands property for commercial development. Rezoning would have allowed the O'Neill Properties Group, of Philadelphia, to construct a 245,000-square-foot office building and a six-story parking garage on the site.

Other projects located within the Alewife floodplain in Arlington and Cambridge have faced similar opposition from residents concerned about flooding, traffic congestion, and wildlife conservation. The opponents, however, have not been able to stop these projects completely, for a variety of reasons. The parcels' zoning allows excessive development. State laws restricting floodplain development are weak. The current flood map of the area is outdated. There is no master planning at the regional level. And the MDC-owned Alewife Reservation, which abuts the development sites, has been neglected over the years because of budgetary concerns.

Town officials typically prefer increases in

property tax revenue from new businesses to the expense of providing the public services that new housing would require. As a result, commercial developers often enjoy better access to municipal and state decision-makers than do citizens.

Still, those who live in the Alewife area have been able to get such developments scaled down in size, have their worst features removed, and obtain commitments for various public amenities. Generally, the developers offer some amenities up front, the residents want far more, and a compromise is eventually reached by town officials, who have the authority to require additional concessions from the developer.

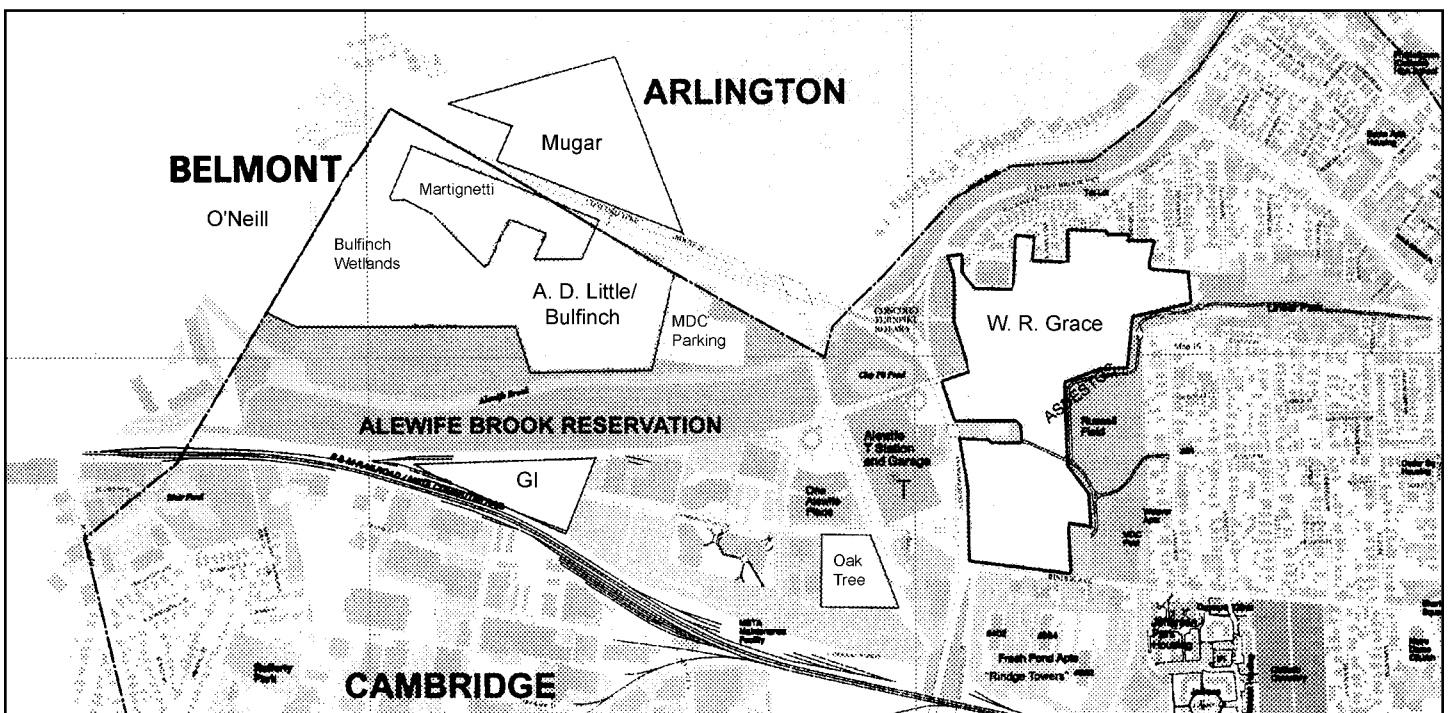
This is how citizen opposition has affected the following projects in Arlington and Cambridge:

The Grace site

W. R. Grace's mid-1980s project, for 2,000,000 square feet of office space and 2,300 parking spaces on its 27 acres in North Cambridge, was halted by

continued on page 13

Map of new development projects near the Alewife Brook Reservation, reprinted from 02140, newsletter of Alewife Neighbors, Inc.





An old silver maple at the site of the proposed O'Neill development on the Belmont Uplands near Alewife Reservation.

History of Opposition to Alewife Development

Continued from page 11

the 1987 real estate crash. Only one of the projected seven buildings was built. In response to neighbors' objections to Grace's scaled-down 1995 proposal, the City of Cambridge formed a Grace Site Advisory Committee, whose report resolved nothing.

The citizens next persuaded the city to adopt a development moratorium, originally six months and later extended to 12. During that time, the city hired two facilitators to bring together neighborhood residents, Grace and its developer, and city planners. Despite lengthy, thoughtful discussions on the site's traffic, flooding, and known toxic waste problems (hydrocarbons and heavy metals), no compromise was reached.

Residents then proposed a downzoning petition for the site, but the City Council weakened the proposal, decreasing maximum allowable square footage to 1,300,000 square feet, 500,000 more than currently exists on the property.

Citizens concerned with asbestos contamination formed a non-profit organization that obtained state money to test the Grace site and nearby children's recreation fields. Contrary to Grace's repeated denials, the testing found significant contamination on both. To prevent the public health risk from the inhalation of carcinogenic asbestos fibers that construction would release into the air, citizens proposed, and City Council passed, an Asbestos Protection Ordinance that regulates construction on contaminated sites.

As a result of thousands of asbestos lawsuits against it, Grace is undergoing bankruptcy reorganization and has put its development plans for the site on indefinite hold.

Genetics Institute

Genetics Institute (GI) recently completed construction of its corporate headquarters at the end of Cambridge Park Drive, abutting the Alewife Reservation. The massive building, 85 feet high with even higher chimneys, was built on a low point that would have been ideal for floodwater storage.

At a relatively late stage in the permitting process, residents appealed the Cambridge Conservation Commission's permit to the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (DEP), citing insufficient flood storage.

While Mass. DEP was reviewing the appeal, a settlement was reached. The appellants agreed to stop opposing the project. In return, GI agreed (1) to leave one area unpaved, (2) to relocate part of its driveway, (3) to provide public access through its property to the Alewife Reservation, (4) to make a parcel of land available for a public nature center, and (5) to contribute money to its construction.

Oaktree

Oaktree is the first residential project in the Alewife area. On Cambridge Park Drive across from the Alewife T station, two buildings, one of seven stories and the other of nine, will contain over 300 rental units. Most of them will be luxury units; some will be affordable as required by Cambridge's affordable housing ordinance.

Nearby residents objected to the lack of city planning for redevelopment in the Alewife area, the excessive size of the buildings, the traffic implications of so many units, and the lack of sufficient flood storage.

When the Cambridge Conservation Commission's hired consultant found a "creative loophole" that decreased the project's required flood storage, residents appealed that decision to the Massachusetts Dept. of Environmental Protection. But Mass. DEP refused to overturn the decision, and the residents then appealed the DEP's decision. When the developer tried to intimidate the appellants by suing them for obstructing the project, two members of the Association of Cambridge Neighborhoods aided the appellants in negotiating with the developer.

The resulting legal and monetary settlement ended both the residents' appeal and the developer's lawsuit. The appellants agreed to refrain from further interference with the project. The developer contributed two separate sums of money to the

continued on next page

appellants, one to be used for the improvement of the Alewife floodplain, the other to create additional affordable housing in Cambridge, and made a number of other concessions.

Mugar

It's been 40 years since David Mugar first attempted to develop his 17-acre property, on the Arlington side of Route 2 across from the Arthur D. Little complex. He currently proposes to build two five-story, 150,000-square-foot office buildings and 1,100 parking spaces. This would pave over 12 of those 17 acres and generate 3,400 vehicle trips per day. Vehicles would enter and exit the site to and from Route 2, via new access and egress lanes that would have to be built.

Mugar has threatened to build an ultra-dense 40B housing development if the office park is not approved. Arlington's Selectmen oppose the project and have voted to buy the property, but lack the money to do so. Attempts by a city-appointed committee and the Arlington Land Trust to negotiate the land's purchase have been unsuccessful thus far.

Mugar asked the Arlington Conservation Commission to declare the flood elevation to be 8.1 feet above sea level, but citizens insisted that it be at least the 8.2 on the (outdated) flood map, preferably more. On this flat site, the difference is significant. A higher flood elevation requires more flood storage and allows less square footage.

The ConCom has rejected Mugar's proposed 8.1 flood elevation. Mugar has appealed that rejection to the Department of Environmental Protection. DEP has held a hearing on the issue and is reviewing it.

Bulfinch

In autumn of 1999, concerned Cambridge residents filed a downzoning petition on two portions of the Alewife land that are in Cambridge: the Arthur D. Little complex and the Martignetti property (where the bowling alley now stands). Cambridge's City Council rejected their petition, stating that these areas should be rezoned as part of a citywide downzoning effort that had been started after the petition

was filed. The Council later changed its mind and removed Alewife from the citywide zoning effort, saying it needed special treatment and had to be rezoned separately.

Two Cambridge City councilors met with representatives of the Bulfinch Cos., the current owner of the Arthur D. Little complex, listened to their proposal for redeveloping the property, and wrote zoning to allow that proposal, which was passed by the Council in September 2001. The rezoning addressed some of the citizens' concerns, but at a high price.

To move forward with its redevelopment plan, Bulfinch will first be required to restore five acres of land that it rents from the MDC for parking. Later, it must demolish buildings constructed too close to Little River. In exchange, it will be allowed to build more square footage on the remaining land.

Opponents say that the deal rewards Bulfinch for demolishing old, repeatedly flooded buildings that it would have torn down anyway. They also say that the MDC should restore the parking lot to its natural state in any case, in order to increase flood-water storage and preserve wildlife habitat.

Like the Grace site, this downzoning (decreased maximum build) still allows a substantial increase beyond what currently exists on the site. On a narrow strip of land between Route 2 and Little River, the new buildings will be allowed to rise to 85 or 90 feet, much higher than the 68-foot height of the current buildings.

As a result, the Alewife Reservation will be "canyonized." Excessively tall buildings on its southern border (like Genetics Institute) will be matched by equally tall buildings to the north, and the aesthetic experience of walking through the Reservation will be further diminished.

Aram Hollman is a resident of Arlington and a former resident of North Cambridge. He is a member of the Coalition for Alewife and the Alewife Study Group.

Eight Zoning Options for the Belmont Uplands

By Jim Graves

Belmont has a formal Open Space and Recreation Plan that identifies the preservation of the Uplands parcel near Alewife Reservation as one of the town's highest priorities. Here are some zoning options for the property, judged on open-space preservation, traffic reduction, and cost or revenue to the town. Zoning, after all, is supposed to reflect the town's priorities, not those of the current landowner.

1. Open Space. Rezone the entire parcel as open space, acquire it, and place it under a permanent conservation restriction. Large sections are already protected wetlands, and there are good reasons to protect the rest of this property. It has always contained a hill, or uplands area, as shown on maps from 1904. It is not, as has been reported, just landfill from Route 2. There are meadows and large old silver maples on this property, which adjoins the MDC reservation. Preservation would require strong leadership and a determined professional fundraising and lobbying effort. Part of the funds could be raised from state and federal sources, some from private foundations. It seems likely that a significant contribution would have to be made by Belmont taxpayers, probably \$30 to \$50 per household per year for ten years. If we enact the Community Preservation Act in April 2002, the state will match taxpayer contributions, dollar for dollar.

2. Playing Fields. Rezone the land for open space and recreational purposes and acquire it to build much-needed athletic fields, with an open-space buffer. The funds could be raised from a combination of local private schools (Belmont Hill expressed interest and other schools may too) and

the Community Preservation Act. A private school would use the fields before 5 p.m. on weekdays, and Belmont would use them after 5 p.m. and on weekends.

3. Large-lot single-family housing. Rezone large sections as open space and rezone the rest of the property for 10 to 20 single-family houses on large lots of 15,000 to 25,000 square feet. These houses could be clustered, village-style, to preserve open space and views. Belmont has the power to do this whenever it wants: the courts nearly always support residential rezonings. This would be revenue positive for the town (that is, the tax revenue would exceed service costs), would create very little traffic, and would put almost no pressure on the schools.

4. Single-family housing. Rezone the property for 20 to 30 single-family residences on 10,000-square-foot lots and widen the conservation buffer between the housing and the wetlands to 200 feet. While not as beneficial as option 3, this alternative would create little traffic, be revenue positive, and have relatively little effect on school enrollment.

5. Clustered townhouses. Rezone the property for higher density housing such as attached townhouses, clustered to preserve an open-space buffer. This could include some affordable housing so that middle-income individuals (teachers, police, firefighters, some senior citizens) could afford to buy or rent in Belmont. This option would generate dramatically less traffic than commercial development, would probably be revenue-neutral (services cost about the same as tax revenue), and would have a higher but still manageable impact on schools.

continued on next page



Junction Brook Flow Questioned by DEP

By Sue Bass

How much ground water that would otherwise feed Junction Brook is seeping into the century-old sewer line that parallels the brook? That's one of the questions that the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection (DEP) has been asked to resolve by testing before it rules on an appeal of whether the brook is perennial.

A hydrologist hired by the Belmont Citizens Forum for the appeal, Denis D'Amore of Lancaster, said that the addition of just two gallons a minute to the brook – a tenth of the apparent flow of ground water in the sewer – would make the brook clearly perennial.

At a site visit held on Sept. 25, a hydrologist representing McLean Hospital, Frank DiPietro of Vanasse, Hangen, Brustlin, said that he twice measured approximately 20 gallons per minute of flow in that sewer line in the middle of the night. Normally

there would be little or no flow at that hour. Both those measurements were made at a period of high ground water, however. To be conclusive, they should be made at various times of the year.

D'Amore also requested details of pipe and flow conditions from Waverly Spring, which feeds the brook; details of pumping from the spring; information about all dewatering operations or water diversions undertaken by McLean; dye testing of storm and sewer pipes to identify areas of cross-contamination; and various historic maps, photos, and plans of the area near the spring and the Higginson parking lot, which was built over a wetland fed by the spring.

The list of information was requested by the DEP analyst hearing the appeal, Rachel Freed. But there is no guarantee that the DEP will require the information or that McLean will provide it.

The Belmont Conservation Commission ruled last spring that the brook was intermittent. Twenty Belmont residents appealed to the regional office of the DEP, with support from the Belmont Citizens Forum. If the brook is found to be perennial, the amount of development nearby may be reduced.

Sue Bass is a Precinct 3 Town Meeting Member.

Uplands Options, *continued from page 15*

6. Two-family houses. Do nothing. The property is currently zoned "General Residence," which means that between 30 and 40 two-family units can be built. If planned insensitively, this form of development could back right up to the wetlands. This option would have a somewhat larger impact on traffic, revenue, and schools than option 5.

7. 40B housing. Negotiate an acceptable proposal for affordable housing. Some estimate that a development with 150 units could get state approval. Twenty-five percent of this apartment-style housing would be priced to make it affordable for moderate-income individuals; the rest would be sold at market rates. However, the actual size is negotiable, and the appeals process would have to consider Belmont's Open Space and Recreation Plan and the property's proximity to the

MDC reservation. A new law requires a 40B developer to wait a year after a non-40B proposal (e.g., O'Neill's recent large office development) has been turned down. The one-year waiting period starts now. This option is probably revenue-positive. It would create about a quarter to half as many vehicle trips as a large office complex. It might require some redistricting to spread additional students across several of the schools.

8. Commercial development. Reconsider a revised O'Neill proposal. The last plan, for 245,000 square feet of offices or labs and nearly 800 parking spaces, was defeated by a clear majority in Town Meeting. Although it isn't likely, a similar plan could be resubmitted – perhaps one that protected more open space and produced less traffic. Unfortunately, it seems unlikely that tax revenue could be guaranteed from such a development. The state's nonprofits would likely oppose any rule that they make payments in lieu of taxes.

State Wants McLean to Save More Buildings

The Massachusetts Secretary of Environmental Affairs has asked McLean Hospital and its developers to consider building less than they are entitled to build to avoid the destruction of many historically significant buildings.

That request came in response to comments filed by the Massachusetts Historical Commission in reaction to the draft Environmental Impact Report submitted to the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs by McLean under the Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act (MEPA.)

The Massachusetts Historical Commission (MHC) noted that at least 10 historic buildings will be demolished and asked that more thought be given to retaining them. As now planned, MHC said, “the proposed project will have an ‘adverse effect’ through the demolition or destruction of historic properties.” In response, Robert Durand, the Secretary of Environmental Affairs, said, “I encourage the proponent to consider development at a lower density than is allowed by zoning where a lowering of the density may serve to preserve historic properties.”

Asked to clarify the impact of this statement, Janet Hutchins, the assistant director of the MEPA unit, said, “It isn’t something that we can absolutely mandate. We ask people to look at feasible alternatives, and it’s always a judgment call whether something’s feasible.”

The state Historical Commission was among 29 individuals, organizations, and state agencies commenting on McLean’s Environmental Impact Report. In addition to historic preservation, the areas where Durand required more work were archaeology; visual impacts of the development; stormwater and wetlands, including Junction Brook; traffic mitigation, including bicycle access; the access road off Pleasant Street; and the redesign of the Trapelo Road/Pleasant Street intersection.

Flood control produced the most comment, with concerns about stormwater drainage raised by the

state Department of Environmental Protection, the Metropolitan District Commission, the Charles River Watershed Association, the Massachusetts Audubon Society, the McLean Open Space Alliance, the Belmont Citizens Forum, Rep. Anne Paulsen, and environmental engineer James Decoulos.

In his response, Durand said McLean’s report “does not thoroughly describe either the existing stormwater management system on the McLean Hospital property or measures proposed to improve its effectiveness with regard to volume and rate of runoff and water quality.” He said the final Environmental Impact Report should also demonstrate how the hospital would mitigate off-site flooding during an unusually heavy storm (one that might occur every hundred years).

The 16-page comment letter submitted by the Belmont Citizens Forum included a long list of provisions that should be included in the Transportation Demand Management (TDM) plan, including mandatory shuttle-buses, incentives for the use of public transportation and carpools, and developer-funded construction of a bike path along Pleasant Street. Durand’s response cited that “comprehensive menu of potential TDM program elements” and said McLean’s final report should “discuss them thoroughly.”

– Sue Bass



Master Plan, *continued from page 20*

However, there has been little public discussion of the pros and cons of each approach. Town leaders have continued to discuss priorities under the assumption that the citizens would not accept a comprehensive debt exclusion.

But merely pitting one project against another narrows our options.

If we realistically consider financing all the projects at once, we may find that they themselves create a natural timeline.

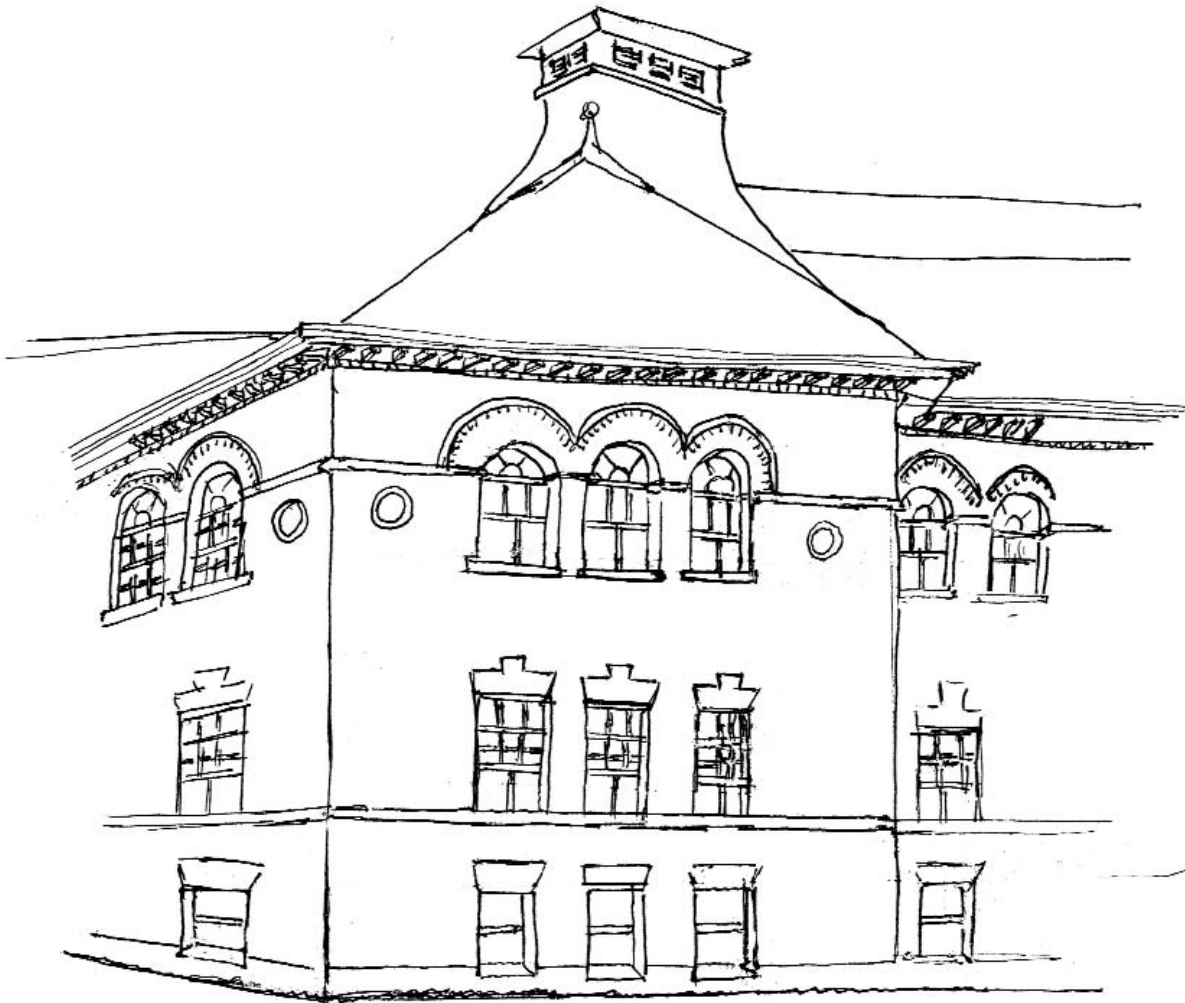
A detailed financial plan, with a master plan that analyzes all town-owned land, buildings, uses, and vacancies, should be presented to the taxpayers. What do they think about footing the whole bill up front? Could town properties be used in other ways? Is there any overlap, or room for consolidation?

For example, consider the senior center and the public library. Naturally, the library does not want to give up its prime location on Concord Avenue. Yet that site abuts a protected steam, creating setback considerations, and the underlying land may not realistically support a large structure without significant and costly structural foundation work. The Kendall site, while not as centrally situated, might be a good location in a town that is only 4.7 square miles.

The existing library could then be used for a senior center after being renovated with money from the Kendall fire insurance settlement. The remaining insurance funds could be combined with state money to construct a premier library on the former Kendall School site.

This plan would cost a fraction of what it would cost to build both a new senior center and a library,

continued



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or to buy and renovate the existing temporary center at Our Lady of Mercy on Oakley Road.

As to the town's fire stations, why not put one station at the site of the VFW Hall, which is town-owned land, and renovate an existing station to create a new VFW hall? This has the dual advantage of ending the controversy over the current proposed location in Cushing Square and protecting one of our historic fire stations.

School officials have recommended that we build a new Wellington School. The present School Administration building on Pleasant Street also needs renovation. But questions remain about the adequacy of the parking at the Town Hall Campus.

What about creating a School Administration wing at a new Wellington School building? That would surely alleviate parking pressures at Town Hall and perhaps allow other departments to use space now allotted to the school staff. This would create vacancies (and opportunities) in other town buildings.

Critics have derided the Community Preservation Act because it would raise property taxes. Yet, right now, Belmont taxpayers will have to bear the burden of renovating the Town Hall Annex with no help from the state. Passage of the Community Preservation Act would create a pool of

money for the town's use, with matching funds from the state for historic preservation. Which will be more costly in the long run to the taxpayers?

Consider the year 2101. Will the future citizens of Belmont thank us for selling off excess property and buildings? It's tempting to solve current problems by selling town properties, like the fire stations, as they become obsolete. But, of course, land becomes scarcer as cities expand. It would be prudent to warehouse the buildings, lease space, convert buildings to senior housing, and keep possession of the properties. Future Belmontians might need them some day.

Sound business principles have made corporate America the envy of the world. Application of these principles to town government would lead to informed and intelligent choices. Whether we ultimately decide to proceed with one project at a time, or undertake the whole group at once, we should have a thorough understanding of the facts and a comprehensive vision of the future.

Lynne Polcari is a Town Meeting Member from Precinct 5 and a former equities trader.

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People Are Asking

Why Doesn't Belmont Have A Master Plan?

By Lynne Polcari

Corporate America relies on fairly standard tactics to create long-term strategies for success. Within a company, there are macro-thinkers and micro-thinkers as well as public relations people who manage expectations. History has proven that no business can be successful without some of each.

The same could be said of town government.

Here in Belmont, we've done a good job at the micro-level. This year, the Board of Selectmen, with the Warrant, Capital Budget, and Permanent Building Committees, has been trying to establish a prioritization plan for the capital projects facing the town. These projects include renovating the Town Hall Annex, consolidating and building new fire sta-

tions, rebuilding the Wellington School, renovating or rebuilding the library, and building a senior/community center.

Each project has undergone a comprehensive cost analysis, along with a detailed study outlining why it is so urgent.

It is here that the lack of long-term planning becomes evident. The fact is that all these projects are tremendously urgent because there has been a minimum of macro planning done in recent history. Some projects, like the fire stations, have been up for consideration for 30 years but were set aside because of some impending crisis elsewhere.

Now, consideration of each project individually has put people in the uncomfortable position of having to forcefully advocate for one project to the detriment of another.

The combination of a macro approach and a micro approach is needed. A financial analysis *has* been done, comparing the cost of all the projects being undertaken at once with the cost of completing them sequentially. *continued on page 18*