



Belmont Citizens Forum

Vision for a Better Belmont: Elizabeth Dionne

This is the first of a new series of interviews with Belmont stakeholders about their vision for Belmont's future. This interview was conducted by Jeffrey North. It has been edited for length and clarity. - Ed.

BCF: Congratulations on your election to the Select Board earlier this year. What have you learned about how Belmont works—either well or not so well?

Overall, having served in an official capacity in Belmont for the past seven-and-a-half years (Town Meeting, Warrant Committee, Community Preservation Committee), I am pleasantly surprised that there are not many surprises. While municipal governance can be daunting and sometimes slow, the town has truly outstanding professionals in place. They are excited about the town's future and implementing progress on multiple fronts.

What I have found personally a bit daunting is the wide range of subject matter areas in which I need to make decisions. I had an excellent

grounding in the town's fiscal challenges and situation, but I have also had to learn a lot about energy, water management, buildings and park maintenance, public safety, and human resources. Currently, my most important skill set is learning who I can reliably call upon to give me accurate, unbiased information. I can't become an expert in every area, so I need to identify people on whose judgment, discretion, and integrity I can rely.

Prior to joining the Select Board, I knew that Belmont had a very dispersed governance structure, but the Select Board has even less authority than I realized. For example, building committees are creatures of Town Meeting, with members appointed by the town moderator. We [the Select Board] have zero authority regarding the choice of budget, architects, project managers, or general contractors. Appointed building committees, composed of dedicated volunteers, make all of those decisions. When problems arise with construction projects, residents look to the Select

Board for solutions, but we have no real authority to intervene or otherwise guide projects along the way.

Belmont has more than 60 committees, commissions, boards, and regional groups. This is great for citizen participation, but it also impedes quick strategic action or policy changes in response to pressing problems. It can also make it difficult to figure out who is ultimately responsible for a particular problem.

The Select Board controls appointments to a majority of these bodies, but a significant minority are independently elected and do not answer to the Select Board. Even when we make appointments, we have limited



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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.

The *BCF Newsletter* is published six times a year, in January, March, May, July, September, and November. Published material represents the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the Belmont Citizens Forum.

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powers of oversight, as members have fixed terms, and many of these bodies (such as the Planning Board or Zoning Board of Appeals) have administrative powers that are completely independent of the Select Board and its policy preferences. We have almost no power to remove members who may not be acting in the town's best interests. We must wait until terms expire to make new appointments.

Following on my first point, what works extremely well right now is the Select Board office and the various town departments. Town administrator Patrice Garvin works closely and collaboratively with each Select Board member. She gives well-reasoned advice and counsel, but she is very aware that the Select Board sets the policy agenda for the town and is deferential to our ultimate authority. Roy Epstein, Mark Paolillo, and I have different skill sets (respectively an economist, an accountant, and a lawyer) and personalities, but we have great mutual respect. We work in a collegial and collaborative fashion for the good of the town. Patrice has made some excellent hires as department heads. They are dedicated public servants who are working through some really difficult circumstances, especially as the town is significantly understaffed, particularly in the Department of Public Works and the Office of Community Development.

I am continually impressed by the time and expertise Belmont residents donate to ensure that the town runs efficiently and well. The town literally could not afford to compensate staff for the time and work product volunteered by residents. There are so many people of goodwill working together for the common good.

BCF: What are some positive steps or improvements in town governance you have seen in the past year?

By far the most significant improvement in town governance is the voter-approved switch from an elected treasurer to an appointed treasurer. There were significant staffing and quality control problems in the treasurer's office during fiscal year 2024, particularly related to appropriate booking of revenue.

In contrast to prior years, the Warrant Committee (on which I previously served) did not receive timely or accurate revenue reports from September 2022 through Annual Town Meeting this past spring. The treasurer's office is in the

process of reviewing all revenue dating from July 1, 2022, for accuracy before the state Department of Revenue can certify our free cash number later this fall. Without that number, the Select Board cannot accurately forecast money available for future operating budgets. As a result, we will be late in setting the amount of the anticipated override request in April 2024, which in turn complicates the entire budgeting process. We will get through this latest problem—somehow we always do—but I am relieved that Leslie Davidson (our recently hired treasurer) is working with remaining staff to modernize and systematize processes in the treasurer's office.

The town has hired a talented town planner, a key element in our plans to rewrite the town's byzantine and archaic zoning bylaw.

We are out of sync with our neighbor and peer communities, most of which have adopted form-based zoning. They are quite literally eating our lunch as businesses leave Belmont for friendlier homes. Without clear, rational, and internally consistent building standards, we can't attract small business or appropriate commercial development, and current homeowners can't make common-sense updates and additions necessary to remain comfortably in their current homes. Rewriting the town's zoning bylaw will take time and significant public input, but it is a necessary first step to steering Belmont toward a vibrant and fiscally sound future.

I am really excited about all of our recent appointments, especially to the Planning Board, the Zoning Board of Appeals, the Economic Development Committee, and the Vision 21 Implementation Committee. These four bodies are now working together in a thorough and creative manner to think about the town's future. In each instance, exemplary professionals have stepped forward to serve the town in a significant way. Despite our current challenges, people are feeling

excited about Belmont's long-term future, which I believe has resulted in a new wave of talent coming forward.

Another significant appointment was to the board of Belmont's Retirement System (which controls a large and growing portion of Belmont's annual operating budget). For years, the Warrant Committee has identified excessive administrative expenses and inferior pension fund investment returns as joint problems for the town's operating budget. I am cautiously optimistic that by next spring we will have resolved both these problems.

Pensions are an absolute obligation. Saving money on administrative expenses and improving investment returns have zero impact on pensions received by retirees, whose rights are fully protected under state and federal law.

The Vision 21 Implementation Committee and Economic Development Committee have taken the Select Board's charge to investigate anti-business provisions in the zoning bylaw and make recommendations for reform, particularly related to restaurants, for Special Town Meeting in November. They are likely to raise the issue of hotels at Annual Town Meeting next spring. Their energy and vision are contagious.

There is tremendous enthusiasm among citizens around making some necessary changes, particularly in the agenda that will come before Special Town Meeting in November. This is true across the political spectrum. Not all of these changes will happen immediately, but they will start some important conversations:

- Voting to put an appointed Board of Assessors on the April 2024 ballot
- Voting to have the police leave Civil Service so that we can address significant staffing shortfalls and develop a more diverse force. Underinvesting in our police force is penny wise and pound foolish. (We are not addressing the fire department at this time.)



- Filing a home rule petition with the state legislature to exempt us from the provisions of MGL 61B (which, among other things, gives a 75% property tax break to wealthy golf courses)
- Streamlining and simplifying the zoning bylaw to make it easier to open restaurants
- Simplifying sign requirements so that businesses don't have to go before the Planning Board to seek special permits. (The Planning Board should be spending its precious time and expertise on higher-level strategic planning.)

If we don't address both our structural and fiscal challenges, we will be left with the worst of all worlds, homeowners who bear a property tax burden which is among the heaviest in the state, while still underfunding our schools and town services.

The Select Board has committed to a systematic program of making PILOT (payment in lieu of taxes) requests from the major nonprofits in town (particularly the Belmont Hill School and Belmont Day School), removing this responsibility from the current elected Board of Assessors.

BCF: What do you see as Belmont's areas for improvement? What do we need to work on in the areas of a) the mechanics of town government, and b) town fiscal policy?

In June of 2022, the Edward J. Collins Center for Public Management at UMass Boston published an

in-depth review of Belmont's governance structure and fiscal challenges. (See "[Have You Read the Collins Report?](#)", November 2022 BCF Newsletter) They pulled no punches—the report was damning. If we don't address both our structural and fiscal challenges, we will be left with the worst of all worlds, homeowners who bear a property tax burden which is among the heaviest in the state, while still underfunding our schools and town services. Our future as a town depends on tackling these problems head-on.

We have already made the most significant structural change, shifting to an appointed town treasurer who answers to the Select Board. The second most important change is the one coming before Special Town Meeting this fall; asking Belmont's voters to support an appointed Board of Assessors.

The Collins Center report recommends examining whether we should shift away from other elected officials/bodies. However, I am concerned about moving too fast on some of these positions, particularly in areas that are working well such as the Town Clerk's office, which is exemplary. If voters approve the shift to an elected Board of Assessors, then our entire finance team will be fully aligned under the leadership of the Select Board: treasurer (collects taxes), accountant (pays bills), assessors (assesses properties and sets the tax rate), and the finance director (sets the annual operating budget). With these four offices aligned, we will have addressed our most pressing structural problems. We need to rewrite our zoning bylaw to be what I call "pro-Belmont."

- We need to rewrite our zoning bylaw to encourage thoughtful, high-quality commercial development. The bylaw is now so complicated and internally contradictory that no one—including the hard-working staff in the Office of Community Development—can figure out how to get small businesses from A to Z.
- We need to adopt form-based zoning, so that homeowners know what they can build or modify as-of-right on their homes. Our current zoning bylaw is arbitrary and irrational. The vast majority of lots are nonconforming, which means even minor changes require review by either or both the Planning Board and the Zoning Board of Appeals.

- We need to better protect current open space by designating it as such on our zoning map, so that zoning matches current use and intent.
- Despite the provisions of the Dover Amendment, there are steps we can and should take to protect our communities from relentless expansion by the Belmont Hill School and Belmont Day School, neither of which currently make any payments in lieu of taxes (PILOT) despite making full use of the town's public safety services and roads.

BCF: Belmont calls itself The Town of Homes. That seems like a dated, perhaps incomplete description. What's missing? How do you think we should describe our town in one sentence?

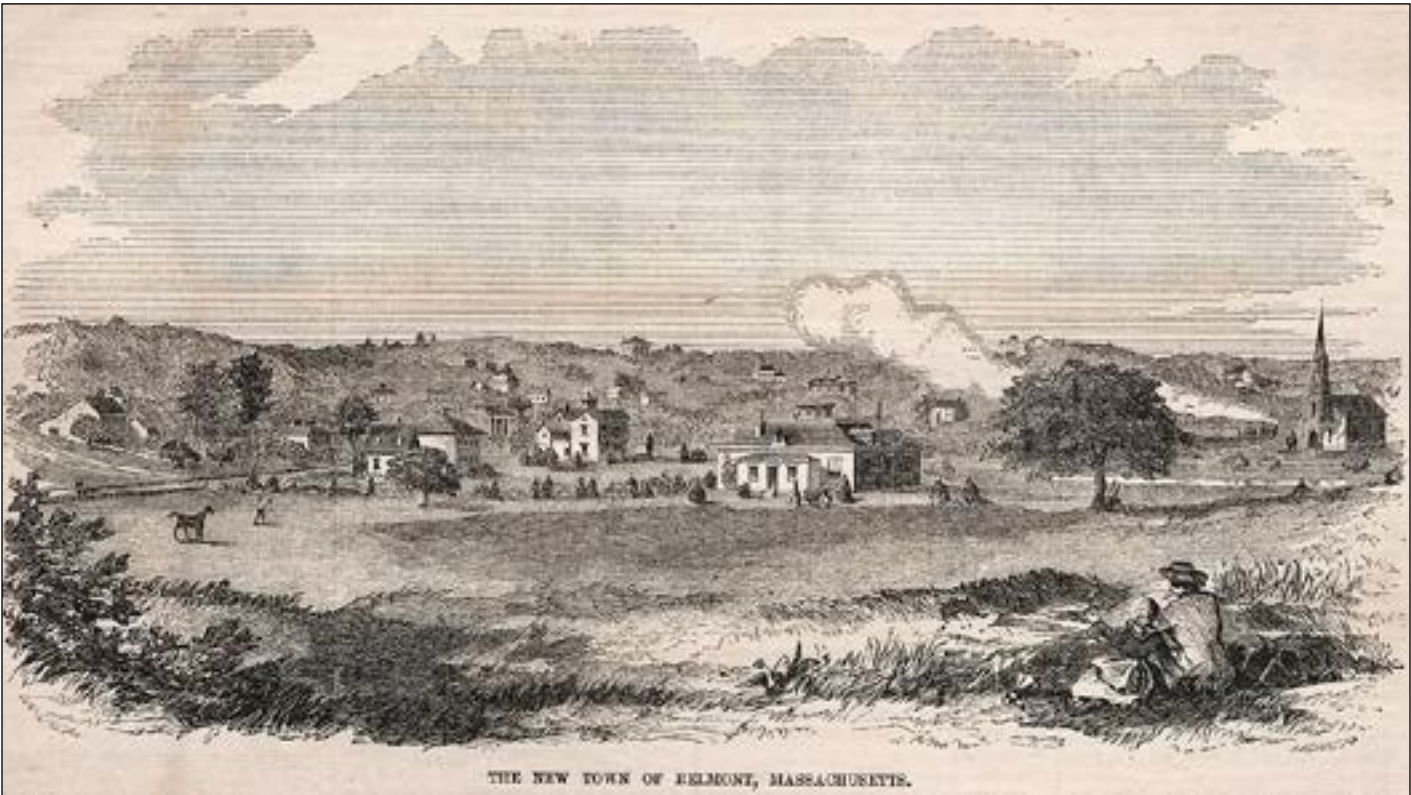
One sentence? Belmont: vibrant neighborhoods, great amenities, world-class schools, thriving families, engaged individuals.

Frankly, we currently are a "town of homes," and that is a problem. We pay extremely high taxes, but we still don't have the necessary revenue to fully fund schools or adequate town services. If we value the future of our community, we need to move beyond this overly narrow conception of Belmont's

current and future identity and encourage high-quality commercial development. Apart from homes, Belmont has a significant number of nonprofits which pay no property taxes. These include the Belmont Hill School, the Belmont Day School, McLean Hospital, and Mass Audubon's Habitat Education Center and Wildlife Sanctuary. Only Habitat provides a true public benefit for Belmont residents. A fifth nonprofit, the Belmont Country Club, receives a 75% property tax deduction on its extensive golf course. We need to reach PILOT agreements with each of these entities. In the case of Habitat, I believe they already provide a significant public good that counterbalances any financial contribution they would otherwise owe the town.

I personally don't love the "Town of Homes" tagline, which, per Jane Sherwin, actually originated with a coal company. This is a quote from a talk Jane gave on the subject:

Once our farms had gone, who were we? The "Town of Homes" phrase suggests the difficulty of defining a new identity. Dick Betts [our late town historian] reports that the earliest reference he has found to this phrase was in advertising by the McGinniss coal yard in Waverley Square in the 1920s and 30s: "We heat Belmont, the Town of Homes." A



"The New Town of Belmont, Massachusetts," an 1859 wood engraving by Winslow Homer.

CHAS. J. McGINNIS
COAL, WOOD, HAY, GRAIN, LIME, CEMENT, etc.
TRAPELO ROAD, WAVERLY
Residence, School Street, Belmont

Advertisement from "Pageant of Belmont, Given Under the Auspices of the Department of Education of the Club, in the Town Hall, Belmont, Mass., April 8th and 9th, 1921."

'Town of Homes'? Doesn't it go without saying that, if you are a town, you have homes? Are we a Town of Homes because we have nothing else? Are we to be defined by an advertisement? Perhaps our agricultural history can help widen our understanding of who we are.

While drafting annual updates for Belmont's FY2025 Community Preservation Act Plan, I persuaded the Community Preservation Committee to remove the "Town of Homes" reference in the open space section. At this point in our history, the

phrase feels exclusionary and backward-looking. Belmont's future will involve many types of homes, particularly if we implement requirements of the MBTA Communities Act to make the town more transit friendly and accessible. "Town of Homes" certainly doesn't evoke a sense of great restaurants, cultural opportunities, athletics, and an accessible town friendly

to cyclists and pedestrians. The Belmont of the future will certainly retain significant open space and tree-lined neighborhoods with a bucolic feel, but it will also include more densely developed areas with small businesses, medical office space, a few attractive hotels, and potentially even lab or commercial space close to Route 2.

BCF: What steps do you believe we need to make in the short-, medium -, and long term to enhance the quality of life in Belmont and to achieve a sound fiscal future that includes vibrant neighborhoods, excellent municipal services, and world-class schools?

We need to tackle our structural operating deficit where recurring expenses regularly outstrip recurring revenues. We constantly strive to find and implement efficient best practices such as with the Belmont Retirement System expenses and investments, but we ultimately must enhance our revenue stream if we want to fund world-class schools and excellent services. This can only happen by enhancing our commercial tax base, moving away from a 95/5 residential/commercial split. My hope is that we can achieve an 85/15 ratio (which is still a modest compared to fiscally healthy towns). Belmont is a wonderful community in a great location. We should be attractive to developers, but our zoning bylaws and policies have discouraged high-quality investment.

Short-term: We need a successful operating override to buy us time to implement other parts of our fiscal plan. Town Meeting needs to adopt the agenda I outline above in order to signal to voters that we have a realistic plan for growth that doesn't just involve squeezing ever more money out of family budgets. Making these immediate changes is the only way we can convince voters to entrust

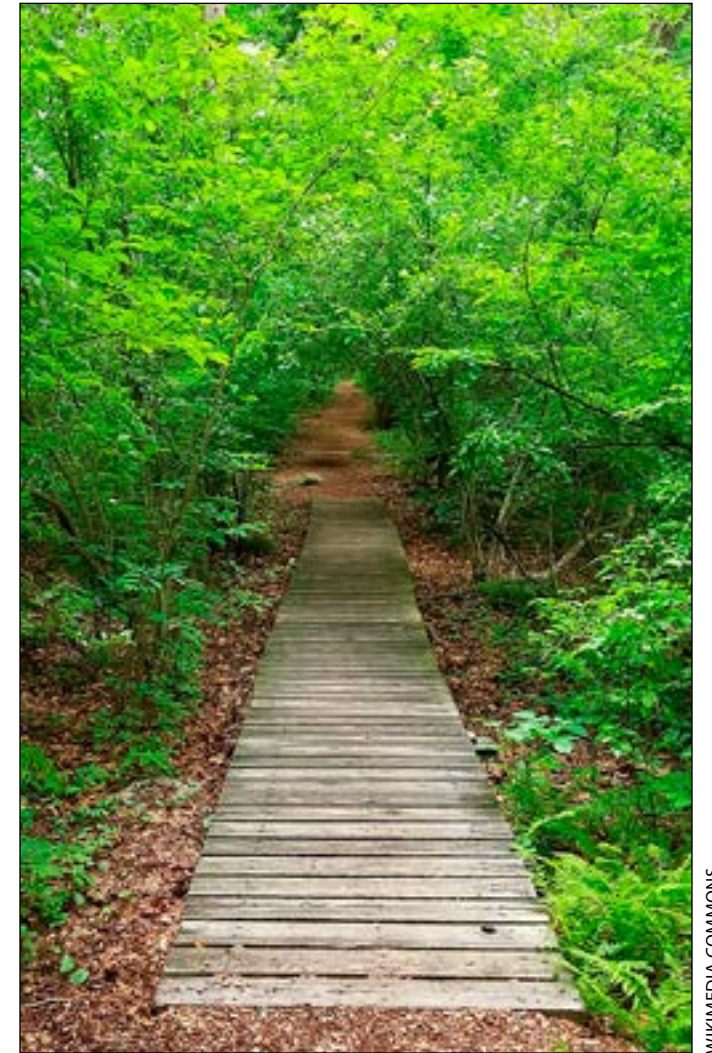
us with an override until our plans for reasonable commercial growth can bear some financial fruit.

Medium-term: We need to rewrite the entire zoning bylaw to allow high-quality commercial development, reasonable renovation of our aging housing stock, some attractive and appropriate hotels, and higher-density housing in clearly demarcated mixed-use neighborhoods, which in turn will support a lively street scene and healthy small business districts.

... We ultimately must enhance our revenue stream if we want to fund world-class schools and excellent services. This can only happen by enhancing our commercial tax base, moving away from a 95/5 residential/commercial split.

Long-term: We have to look at western Belmont, the only stretch of truly open space in our geographically constrained town. We need to protect current open space (Lone Tree Hill, Rock Meadow, Habitat), which ironically is currently zoned single family. At the same time, we need to approach the town's largest landowner, the Belmont Country Club, about potential development of some of their property.

I am extremely concerned about the current direction of our public schools, prioritizing so-called equity over academic excellence, particularly in the area of mathematics. Academic excellence and all kinds of diversity can and should co-exist, including intellectual diversity. As a special education attorney, I passionately believe that we need to serve the needs of all students, from those who require intensive academic support



Path at Mass Audubon Habitat, Belmont MA.

to those who simply want the freedom to explore their "affinities" (a term used for Autism Spectrum Disorder (ASD) students who have particular, in-depth interests or abilities.) Some children (often called "twice-exceptional") need access to advanced subject matter to feel fully welcome in Belmont schools, and it is punitive to insist that they remain at an arbitrarily determined grade level that does not correspond to their affinity.

If we do not protect our schools' reputation for academic rigor and excellence, that will have a devastating impact on our sense of community. It will also remove a key reason that so many people want to live and work in Belmont and undermine next year's override request, a major reason Newton's override request failed this past spring. If we drive out dedicated families who value academic excellence, losing them to private schools or other communities, we will lose key pillars of support for robust school funding and parent engagement.



Volunteers planting trees at Lone Tree Hill in 2022.

Opinion: Belmont Needs Business-Friendly Zoning

By Taylor Yates and Paul Joy

Belmont has zoned itself into a financial corner. Fiscally healthy towns balance their tax bases between commercial and residential real estate, Belmont does not. Belmont receives only 5% of its property tax revenue from commercial real estate, whereas fiscally strong towns receive 20% or more. We receive so little revenue from commercial real estate because the few areas in town where it is allowed suffer from overly burdensome regulation.

The Economic Development Committee and Vision 21 Implementation Committee were charged by the Select Board to review Belmont's zoning bylaws and to look for ways in which they could be reformed to improve our commercial districts. After reviewing several areas of improvement and working with a Massachusetts zoning consultant, the town planner, and Town Council, the committees have put forth two zoning bylaw amendments. We anticipate the Select Board will sponsor the amendments at November's Special Town Meeting.

Commercial real estate is important

Why is commercial real estate so important? From the town's perspective, commercial real estate is more profitable because it can generate the same or more revenue per acre and consumes relatively little in terms of town services, especially educational spending.

Consider the following example where, according to the Assessor's Office, the median tax on a home in Belmont is \$16,450, whereas, according to the Massachusetts Department of Education, Belmont spends \$15,279 per pupil. So a median home with just one child in the school district generates only \$1,200 for the town, and doesn't include the cost of other town services and additional children in the school system. Commercial real estate does not put kids in schools, which makes it very helpful in offsetting the cost of residents.

Town finances are more complicated than this simple example, but these fundamental economics are inescapable. We either need to make big cuts to the town's budget, grow

our commercial tax base, or continue to pass tax overrides.

Many Belmontians support investment in our commercial tax base because it can improve the quality of life in town. Restaurants are an excellent example of this. Filling empty storefronts with new restaurants improves town finances, supports our local business owners, improves our streetscapes, and provides dining options for our residents.

Several of the zoning bylaws regulating restaurants are onerous, outdated, and time consuming for the boards, committees, and town departments that are responsible for a highly detailed review. Not only that, our existing zoning bylaws favor chain restaurants because navigating our complex process requires deep pockets.

Changes are being proposed for the town's definitions of restaurants, its special permit require-



JEFFREY NORTH



JEFFREY NORTH

ments, and its parking mandate. The goals are to streamline processes, modernize regulations, and foster a more diverse, inclusive, and business-friendly environment while preserving Belmont's historic, small-town character.

The Economic Development Committee and Vision 21 Implementation Committee have spent the better part of 2023 investigating zoning reforms and have proposed two restaurant-focused zoning bylaw amendments (available on [the Vision21 website](#)) that will do three things:

- Make it easier to open a restaurant in town by allowing restaurants by right in all business districts
- Close the existing chain restaurant loophole by creating a special category for "food service establishments, formula based" that requires a special permit and dictates guidelines for receiving one
- Bring the town's restaurant parking requirements in line with surrounding towns

It is important to note that these amendments will not change the following:

- They will not remove restaurant regulations. Restaurants have to obey applicable laws, just like everyone else.
- They will not affect bylaws regarding new construction and renovations. Those bylaws will remain in place.

These changes will not solve all the town's financial problems, but they are an important and thoughtful step in the right direction.

We ask for the support of Town Meeting members and the public as the need for these changes is great. The committees will continue to address business zoning bylaws to ensure alignment and competitiveness with our surrounding communities and pave the way for many more businesses to open and thrive.

Taylor Yates is chair of the Vision21 Implementation Committee, a member of the Planning Board, and a Town Meeting member from Precinct 2. Paul Joy is chair of the Economic Development Committee, a member of the MBTA Multifamily Community Advisory Committee, and a Town Meeting member from Precinct 7.

Opinion: Why Pay Property Taxes When You Can Get a Tax Break?

By Max Colice

Over the past 10 years, the Belmont Country Club has received tax breaks totaling more than \$4 million on its property tax bills thanks to a state law called Chapter 61B. Chapter 61B allows country clubs and other private nonprofit organizations to get a 75% discount on property taxes for recreational land, including golf courses. Belmont taxpayers pay for this enormous tax benefit. That’s because when one taxpayer’s bill goes down, everyone else’s bill goes up to offset that reduction. In other words, every taxpayer in Belmont has been subsidizing the Belmont Country Club’s property taxes for years under Chapter 61B.

The Massachusetts Golf Association pushed Chapter 61B through the state legislature in the late 1970s in response to a Massachusetts Supreme Judicial Court decision that increased country clubs’ assessed values—and property taxes. This decision held that properties should be assessed at their “full and fair cash value”—the fair market value or the price the land would fetch in a voluntary sale. For many country clubs, this was a rude shock. Instead

of being taxed like pasture land or recreational land, their golf courses started being taxed as undeveloped land ripe for development.

Over the past 10 years, the Belmont Country Club has received tax breaks totaling more than \$4 million.

For the Massachusetts Golf Association (MGA), the solution was clear: instead of increasing dues or greens fees, they lobbied for a tax break for golf courses. Relying on powerful friends in the state legislature, the MGA pushed for a state constitutional amendment creating a special tax classi-

fication for golf courses and other recreational land. The MGA promoted this state constitutional amendment as a way of preserving an environmentally friendly open and recreational space, which they called a “Green Belt,” through the Boston

In other words, every taxpayer in Belmont has been subsidizing the Belmont Country Club’s property taxes for years under Chapter 61B.

suburbs. They also warned that without this tax break, higher taxes would force golf courses to close or move, only to be replaced by development. Green Belt proponents also published pamphlets promising, somewhat disingenuously, that this tax break would not increase taxes on other properties:

“Will approval of Question 7 [the MGA’s proposed state constitutional amendment to lower property taxes for golf courses and other recreational land] increase taxes on homes, businesses, and industries?”

“No. Approval of Question 7 will merely authorize the Legislature to require lower assessment for open space land—not for buildings or improvements.”

In 1979, the MGA’s push for a state constitutional right to pay lower taxes morphed into Chapter 61B. Although this tax break is mandated by state law, the tax break is on property taxes collected by towns and cities. It’s available to any nonprofit organization with more than five acres of recreational or open space. If a country club applies for it, then the town has to grant it. (Not every eligible country club in Massachusetts applies for tax relief under Chapter 61B.)

Chapter 61B also gives towns that grant these tax breaks a right of first refusal to purchase the land that benefits from the tax break and the right to collect 10 years of “roll-back” taxes if the land is

sold and used by the buyer for a different purpose. For most towns, however, exercising the first refusal right is impractical, and the land rarely comes up for sale.

Chapter 61B succeeded dramatically in lowering property taxes for country clubs. In May 2023, the *Boston Globe* reported that at least 100 golf courses received property tax cuts under Chapter 61B, with 10 courses receiving breaks of about \$100,000 or more, including the Belmont Country Club, which received a tax break of \$367,910. And in Newton, three country clubs received tax breaks totaling about \$1.75 million despite a failed override, according to the *Boston Globe*.

Because Chapter 61B is a state law, the state legislature must change it. This November, Belmont Town Meeting can push for that change by passing a warrant article asking Belmont’s state legislators, Senator Will Brownsberger and Representative Dave Rogers, to file a home rule petition exempting Belmont from Chapter 61B.

Better yet, Belmont’s state legislators could pursue a more comprehensive change to benefit the entire state, perhaps by working with state legislators from Newton and other disproportionately affected districts. If you are tired of subsidizing country clubs, call your Town Meeting members and your state legislators to advocate for eliminating the tax break provided to private country clubs by Chapter 61B.

Max Colice is a member of the Vision 21 Implementation Committee and a Belmont resident.

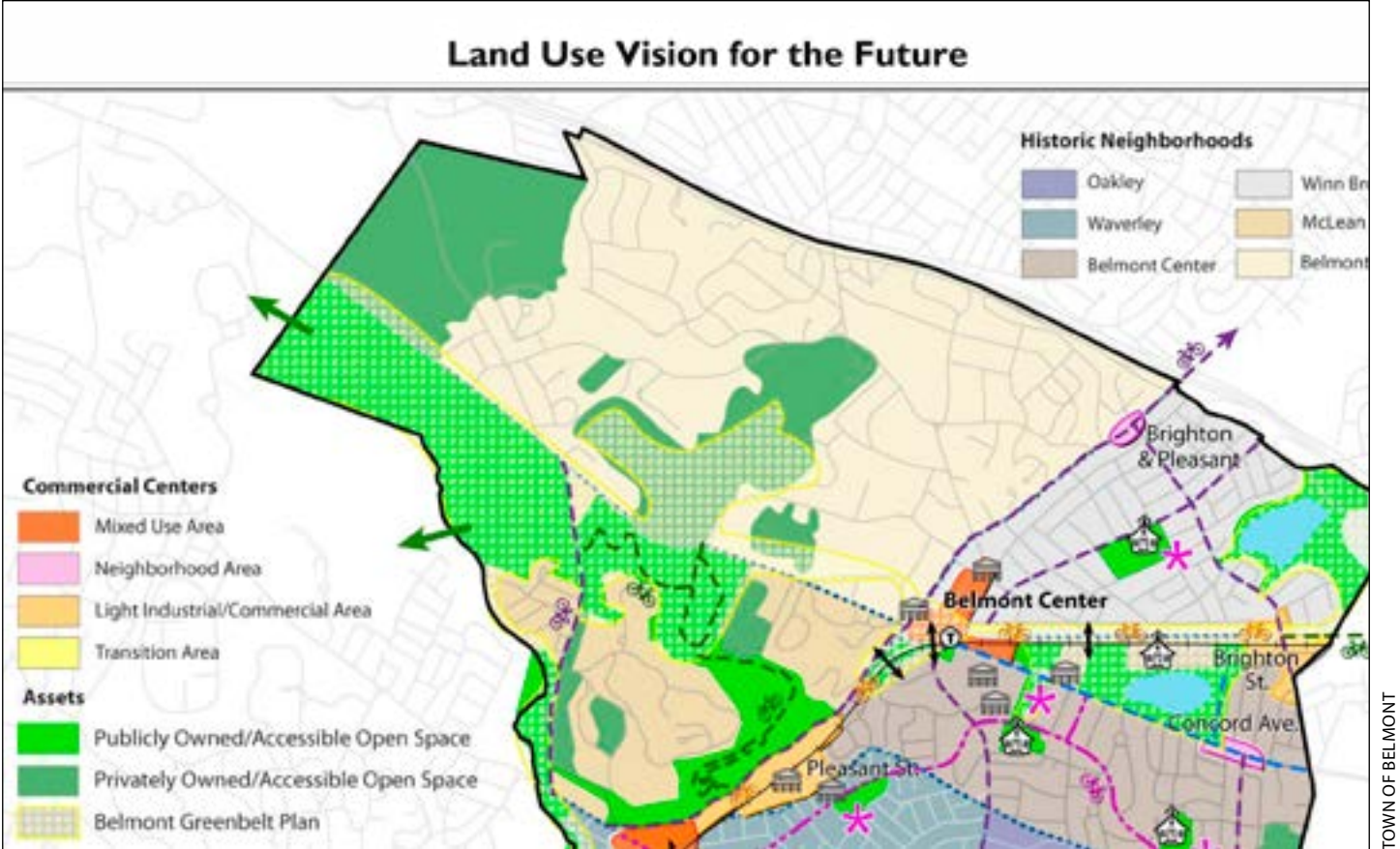


Image from Belmont’s 2010 Comprehensive Plan. Belmont Country Club appears in the northwest corner.



Profiles in Belmont: Joe Rancatore

By Elissa Ely

“Ranc’s chocolate ice cream can comfort the distressed, alleviate pain, and stand in for antidepressants if you have lousy medical insurance.” (Yelp)

Somewhere in the labyrinth of Facebook, where even unwinding a string won’t help you find your way out, there is a photo of Joe Rancatore sitting on a straight chair in front of a freezer of pre-packed ice cream pints in his Belmont store. He is listening seriously to a little girl in a princess gown and accessories, and she is speaking to him with the same intensity. It’s the perfect communion between a business owner and his customer.

This communion extends to Rancatore store employees, too. The Belmont store is a thriving little village, staffed by high school teenagers competently and confidently running the place. Usually, there’s not an adult in sight; autonomy is a Rancatore hallmark. “I always thought I’d attract the malcontent, the 15th pick in basketball,” Joe says, “but we attract the sharpest, smartest,



overbooked kids, because it’s known how we treat our staff. I want to be a haven.”

Autonomy comes with responsibility. Cell phone time on shift: not allowed. Impatience with elderly customers: not allowed. There’s plenty of limit-setting, and a mentor’s insistence on accountability. “They’re amazed I don’t fire them. One kid said to me: ‘I used to think you were scary. Now I just think you’re loud.’”

“Rancatore’s Ice Cream: a prized job.

Looks for:

Social skills, customer service skills, commitment to schedule.

Won’t hire:

If you can’t say hello and introduce yourself.

Or, if ‘Mom’ is applying to the job for you.”

(Help Around Town website)

When the Rancatore family lived in South Jersey, Joe’s father—a WWII vet and product of the depression—worked in the men’s department at Macy’s. Well-heeled and un-heeled customers received the same respect. He told his son, “Treat a man as if he’d spend \$500, treat him royally, and he might buy \$25 BECAUSE he was treated royally.”

After the family moved to St. Louis, Mr. Rancatore started his own men’s store. He was in his 50s. “Don’t ever be afraid to start your own business,” he said. When Joe opened Ranc’s, advisory phone calls arrived every morning at 11 am.

Early mentoring came from a non-paternal source as well. Several unsuccessful semesters at U Missouri were salvaged by working in the local Jewish deli, where the owner “taught us to serve the old, to be exceptional, to run the place.” If an elderly man fixed in his habits wanted corned beef on brown bread instead or rye, eye-rolling was prohibited.

Moving to Cambridge with \$300 in 1981, Joe worked alongside his brother at Toscanini’s ice cream for four years before branching into independence. He looked into Worcester, checked out Waltham, and finally settled on Belmont after a landlord offered to rent an empty piano and organ store next to a bridal shop. Joe’s prepara-

tions included researching how many cars drove on Trapelo Road and School Street in a given time. He neglected to realize, though, that driving by did not mean stopping in.

The first few years, he lived on tuna, rice cakes, and Grapenuts. “I felt like the loneliest man in town, one customer at a time, making ice cream in the back by myself.” Days were long, with hours to read the fine print of the *New York Times*. If a lone customer commented on the quietude, Joe would gamely answer, “You should’ve been here 20 minutes ago.” In the morning calls, his father reminded him: no one supports a loser.

That was then. Now three stores employ up to 70 school kids, and offer 75 to 100 different flavors annually, including some vegan recipes developed by one of Joe’s sons (“He’s like a mad chemist with the oat and hemp.”) Typical days probably don’t exist.

As de facto manager, Joe circulates between Belmont, Newton, and Lexington. He pops into the Waltham production facility, which produces up to 200 ice cream buckets daily during the hot season. Maybe an employee in Lexington—some high school senior—wants a reference written. Maybe someone in Newton calls in sick and there’s a coverage gap behind the counter. Special orders have to be discussed. A floor needs mopping. There’s rarely time for a second cup of coffee at home, and the *New York Times* gathers dust. Still, for the man no longer lonely, “Sometimes my favorite time is 7 AM, alone in the store, me and my thoughts.”

A large part of Rancatore’s ethos is its deliberate, well-known generosity. The window washer never leaves without free coffee. The UPS man gets a drink every time he delivers, and when repairmen climb down from the hot roof, teenage employees ply them with ice cream. “I love that they took the lesson,” Joe says. “They take care of people who take care of us.”

In 2019, Facebook announced that Ranc’s was “going green,” offering discounts for customers who brought aluminum spoons, their own mugs, or skipped lids and straws. Joe is moving towards compostable containers and garbage liners, though it’s more expensive and will mean taking the brand name off of plastic cups: worse for business, better for the world.

He also supports the larger community. Recently, a fundraiser for Food Access Programs



at the Waltham Fields Community Farm included concierge rhubarb sorbet from their farm-harvested fruit and mint ice cream from plants grown in their gardens.

“Rancatore’s—a Belmont institution. I don’t believe there’s a single person who grew up in Belmont and didn’t know someone who worked there, if they didn’t work there themselves.” (Yelp)

Yet even Rancatore’s cannot go on forever with a Rancatore at the helm. In the future, Joe thinks of mentoring young business owners. He thinks of helping others through the snags of negotiating rental leases. He thinks of returning to yoga and swimming, of drinking two cups of coffee in his own home in the morning, and—because a giving nature does not recede with retirement—of volunteering for Crayons to Cradles. He knows what will happen, though. “Soon I’d be in charge of the whole thing.”

Elissa Ely is a community psychologist.

Residents Restore Royal Road Woods Ecosystem

By Vincent Stanton, Jr. and Pamela Andrews

Belmont Conservation Volunteers (BCV) formed earlier this year to work on “restoring our natural spaces for everyone to enjoy.” Volunteer efforts have focused on reining in the extensive and expanding invasive species displacing native plants which support local insects, birds, and mammals.

The BCV emerged from pioneering volunteer work by Leonard Katz on Lone Tree Hill. (See “Spare a Thought for Lone Tree Hill”, BCF Newsletter, September 2022.) To expand that work to town-owned land, Katz and Sustainable Belmont leader Dean Hickman obtained permission from both the Select Board and, because many of the worst infestations are near water, the Belmont Conservation Commission, which regulates activity adjacent to bodies of water. BCV committed to

remove invasive plant species on a specified list from designated wetlands. The group organized and led invasive plant removal events on most weekends last summer.

BCV can provide a more comprehensive approach to the local invasive plant problem than has been possible in the past for two reasons:

BCV can address the problem in a town-wide context. That is essential because some water-loving invasive plants, like *Fallopia japonica*, commonly known as Japanese knotweed, can be spread by streams. It is futile to eliminate the plant downstream of an upstream colonization; the plant will quickly reseed. Since many of Belmont’s streams are fed by water from Belmont Hill, controlling the plant on Lone Tree Hill—especially near water—may have positive ripple effects. There

will be less spreading and less reseeding and regrowth downstream.

BCV can provide a continuous level of effort. Invasive plants are persistent and aggressive. They cannot be controlled by one-off (often annual) cleanups, although those events are important because they marshal a large workforce to bear on the problem. The weekly events organized by BCV provide a qualitatively different level of pressure on invasive species.

The BCV group also gives participants a chance to learn about and share best practices for invasive plant control.

On Monday, October 9, the Belmont Religious Council sponsored its annual Belmont Serves volunteer event featuring four projects, including a collaboration with BCV to pick up trash and attempt to control the massive knotweed infestation at the town-owned Royal Road Woods. This under-appreciated parcel of land is a minute from Belmont Center and seconds from the 74/75 bus stop and the Belmont Center commuter rail station. It could be an attractive pocket park featuring a pond drained by a small stream, but all that has been hidden, that is, buried.

The knotweed infestation is densest around the water at the bottom of Royal Road, where there is a roughly 150 by 70 square foot stand of 8 to 10-foot high stalks. This knotweed has displaced all other plant life save for a few old trees. That zone was targeted for knotweed clearance. The approach was to sever the stalks at the base. At this time of year, the plant sends energy down to its massive underground root system (rhizomes). Interrupting that energy flow weakens the plant.

About a dozen energetic volunteers used shovels to clear a 75- by 50-foot area of knotweed, and the plants were piled up and left to decompose on site. In the newly cleared zone, it was possible to observe the course of the stream that originates opposite 14 Royal Road. It runs east along the railroad embankment before curling south toward Royal Road, where it enters an underground pipe that empties into the storm drain. Note that this stream is not Wellington Brook, which is confined in a 6-foot underground pipe that crosses under Royal Road uphill of the pond and stream. (See “Whither the Royal Road Woods?,” BCF Newsletter, January 2022, for a map).



Vincent Stanton, Jr. tangles with knotweed.

Any serious effort to control knotweed requires a long-term strategy. Here are three strategies in decreasing order of time and labor required for implementation.

Cutting knotweed to the ground multiple times each year. That cutting starves the plant of energy, which is created by photosynthesis in the leaves during the summer and stored in the rhizomes over the winter. This is the approach BCV employed on October 9.

Clearing knotweed (optionally including excavation of the root system), flattening it to the ground, and then covering it with a heavy geotextile (synthetic fabric) designed to block out sunlight and prevent vertical growth.

Applying herbicide (usually glyphosate, sold under the brand name RoundUp) to the leaves (via foliar spraying) or stems (via direct injection) once



Belmont Serves Royal Road knotweed crew. From left to right: Caroline Newton, Teddy Newton, Karsten Kueppenbender, Vince Stanton, Owen Thomas, Jane Quigley, John Little, Jeremy Broitman, Molly Aalyson, and Eric Wefald.

a year in the fall, when the vascular system of the plant is sending energy down to the rhizomes.

There are numerous reports about each method, but only a few controlled studies. In one interesting local study, described in a report published in the Ecological Landscape Alliance newsletter, the three methods were tested for up to six years. There were two worksites; the first was a dense knotweed infestation along the Minuteman Bikeway in Lexington as it skirts Arlington's Great Meadows, where the first two methods were implemented by volunteers under the aegis of Friends of Arlington's Great Meadows.

The second worksite was along I-290 in Worcester, where Massachusetts Department of Transportation landscapers used stalk injection or foliar application of glyphosate to eliminate knotweed while simultaneously planting switchgrass to provide competition. While neither of the methods was a complete success by the end of the study period (up to six years along the bike path, two years in Worcester), each had brought about a significant reduction in the knotweed infestation and was on a plausible path to complete control with further effort.



A pile of vanquished knotweed at Royal Road Woods.

The level of volunteer effort for the first approach was massive—the US Department of Agriculture (USDA) Forest Service recommends cutting the stalks to the ground at least six times per year—and would need to continue for longer than six years. Method 2 was labor intensive for a short period when the ground was prepared and the geotextile installed. Removal after one year proved insufficient to control the knotweed. Removal after three years was much better, but some viable knotweed rhizomes remained. The USDA recommends leaving the geotextile in place for up to five years. A variant of the geotextile method, described in an informative YouTube video by a wildlife specialist at the University of New Hampshire Cooperative Extension, entails placing wood chips and mulch over the geotextile and starting anew, leaving the rhizomes permanently buried. However, even this method required two extra years of patching breaches in the geotextile.

The application of glyphosate appears to be the consensus recommendation, as it is the only method that attacks the rhizomes and is, therefore, more efficient and requires less labor. Notably, several conservation organizations, including Mass Audubon, recommend the application of glyphosate to control knotweed.

The use of herbicides near wetlands requires permission of the Conservation Commission and would typically be implemented professionally. So, while the herbicide application is a quicker approach, it would likely cost more.

One final challenge: the knotweed infestation is not confined to town land but extends onto contiguous MBTA property along the steep embankment next to the Fitchburg Line.

Getting involved

Anyone can join the Belmont Conservation Volunteers. As the group points out on its website, their weekend projects offer an opportunity to get outside, exercise, meet your neighbors, and learn more about local plants while helping to restore our public lands. The easiest way to get involved is to join the BCV Google group by sending an email expressing interest to belmontconservationvolunteers@gmail.com or visiting www.sustainable-belmont.net/belmont-conservation-volunteers/

Vincent Stanton, Jr. is a Belmont Citizens Forum board member. Pamela Andrews is a Belmont resident.

How to Make Decisions About Heat Pumps

By Will Brownsberger

Edited and reprinted with permission from Brownsberger's blog, willbrownsberger.com/heat-pumps.

Many people are seeking to shrink their personal carbon footprint. Many also seek to participate constructively in the energy systems transitions necessary to achieve net zero carbon emissions.

There is a broad consensus among climate planners in Massachusetts that we need to electrify heating in buildings. However, each building raises unique challenges. This article attempts to summarize the environmental and consumer considerations for people seeking to electrify home heating. Many of these issues are explored in more depth in this heat pump outline.

Several good heat pump applications are also beyond the scope of this article:

It is easier to build heat distribution systems (ducts or piping) that are fully compatible with efficient heat pumps in a new home. I generally favor electrified heating in all new construction.

When adding heating to an unheated or inadequately heated part of a home, a heat pump is likely to be a good solution, especially since it will also provide air conditioning. A single-head mini-split installed to serve a single room is often relatively inexpensive and often relatively efficient.

When adding, expanding, or replacing air conditioning, heat pumps are likely to be a good solution. Anecdotal reports and crude survey evidence indicate that air conditioning upgrades may be the most common occasion for a heat pump installation. Heat pumps are more efficient and quieter than conventional air conditioners and they provide heating. Air conditioning is becoming more necessary for health as temperatures rise. It's reasonable to add or expand air conditioning—even though additional cooling will mean increased greenhouse gas emissions.

Ground source heat pumps are not usually an option for people in my district because they usually require large lots. They are considerably more expensive to install than electric heat pumps, but they are less expensive and more environmentally beneficial to run.

Environmental benefits of heat pumps

A heat pump conversion from an existing heating system is likely to reduce greenhouse gas emissions:

When running in place of electric resistance heating, heat pumps substantially reduce electricity use and related emissions.

When running in place of fossil fuel heating, heat pumps are typically efficient enough that they will reduce greenhouse gas emissions. In other words, they are typically efficient enough that the fossil emissions they will eliminate from heating in the home will exceed the emissions that result from increased demand on our electric power grid.

The environmental operating benefits are greater for conversions from oil and propane than for conversions from natural gas. Typical heat pump installations replacing natural gas are beneficial, but the net benefits are smaller and more sensitive to inefficiencies in the particular installation. (See the discussion of heat pump performance and efficiency challenges on willbrownsberger.com. For an example of a net-benefit analysis, see slide 18 in the presentation on heat pump retrofits on my website.)

Every heat pump installation should be designed carefully to assure efficient operation that maximizes environmental benefits and minimizes operating costs. Good design is also important for comfort. Most people will want to work with a heat pump coach or consultant to assure that they are getting objective advice as to how to achieve the best results in their own home.

Putting aside the minority of installations where heat pumps are so inefficient that they do not generate greenhouse gas savings, the more a heat pump runs and replaces heat from the existing heating system, the more savings it generates.

People seeking to benefit the environment should use heat pumps in a consistent and disciplined way to displace heating, either by doing a full replacement of existing heating, or using integrated controls as recommended by Mass Save. With integrated controls, your legacy system will only run when it is quite cold out. Mass Save has a major study underway which will shed light on the extent to which consumers achieve both comfort and operating savings with integrated controls.

Heat pumps can leak refrigerants. These refrigerants are potent greenhouse gasses. If heat pumps are used heavily, the savings they generate will likely exceed substantially the expected harms from leaks.

If the heat pumps are lightly used, there is a real risk that harms from leaks will exceed operating environmental benefits.

If replacing an air conditioning system, then the risks of environmental harms from refrigerant leaks from heat pumps are not necessarily greater than the already-existing risks of leaks from the air conditioning system and may not need to be weighed in the decision. However, it is important to confirm the lawful disposal of harmful refrigerants.

Coming technology improvements

Over the next two or three years, the heat pump and air conditioner markets are likely to shift to refrigerants that are more efficient and less potent as greenhouse gasses. Current industry statements suggest this will result in an improvement of

approximately 10% in efficiency. Additionally, the risks of significant environmental harms from leaks will go down by a factor of three or more.

These changes will increase the net environmental benefits of heat pump installations. They are most likely to be worth waiting for where the conversion is from natural gas, especially when the planned conversion is only partial; in partial natural gas conversions, the risk that leaks will offset operating benefits is greatest. The case for waiting is also stronger if the heating system is relatively young and would be fully replaced.

Think creatively about your home

If you have limited resources, it is important to think carefully about your options for spending money to benefit the environment—insulation measures or partial heat pump conversions may

stretch your limited resources further than a full heat pump conversion. In some heat pump conversions, especially those from natural gas, the cost per ton of greenhouse gas savings may exceed \$1,000 per ton, well above the Biden administration’s estimated social harms from carbon emissions.

Every home is different and different households have different needs. For example, an empty-nester couple staying in a single-family home might be able to save money and carbon emissions by turning their fossil heat system way down and adding small mini split heat pumps in only a couple of heavily used rooms. Constituents have shared many hybrid permutations that keep them comfortable while saving costs and emissions.

The cost and benefits of insulation and other energy efficiency measures are beyond the scope of this article. The possible savings from these measures depend on specifics of the home. However, in some cases, the payback can be quick. Mass Save requires basic weatherization as a condition of larger rebates and covers 75% to 100% of the cost.

Cost considerations with heat pumps

In Massachusetts, given our relatively high electric rates, heat pump conversions from fossil fuels are not usually motivated by cost considerations. The benefit-cost analysis of heat pump conversions depends on several factors.

What heating fuel are you converting from?

Converting from electric resistance heat, heat pumps will likely cut your operating costs by 50% or more. Depending on your electric rates and on your home’s energy efficiency, this may be enough to recover your capital costs.

Converting from oil or propane heat to heat pumps, cost savings will depend on market conditions and your own local electric rates. Electric rates vary substantially across communities in Massachusetts. Do not trust an online savings calculator that does not ask for your fuel cost and electric rate assumptions. Generally, in an oil or propane conversion, savings are uncertain and likely to be very modest.

Converting from natural gas to heat pumps will rarely result in operating cost savings (and may result in increased costs) unless the historical price relationship between the cost of gas and the cost of electricity changes substantially in the future.

See more discussion of fuel prices and operating economics on willbrownsberger.com.

How much will you actually use your heat pump?

Substantial fuel displacement is only guaranteed in whole home installations; in partial conversions, where the existing heating system continues to serve part of the load, results will depend heavily on customer behavior.

How much does your heat pump cost to install?

Installation costs have risen substantially above projected levels due in part to high incentives. Installation costs vary widely across homes. Each consumer will need to solicit several bids and get a feel for how installers view their particular situation. Each installer will bring a different perspective to the possibilities for your home.

What is the condition of the systems that the heat pump is replacing?

If your heating system is aging, then it’s reasonable to factor in a percentage of replacement costs as an offset to your initial investment.

In addition to these heating system factors, you may consider costs or savings associated with replacements or expansions of air conditioning.

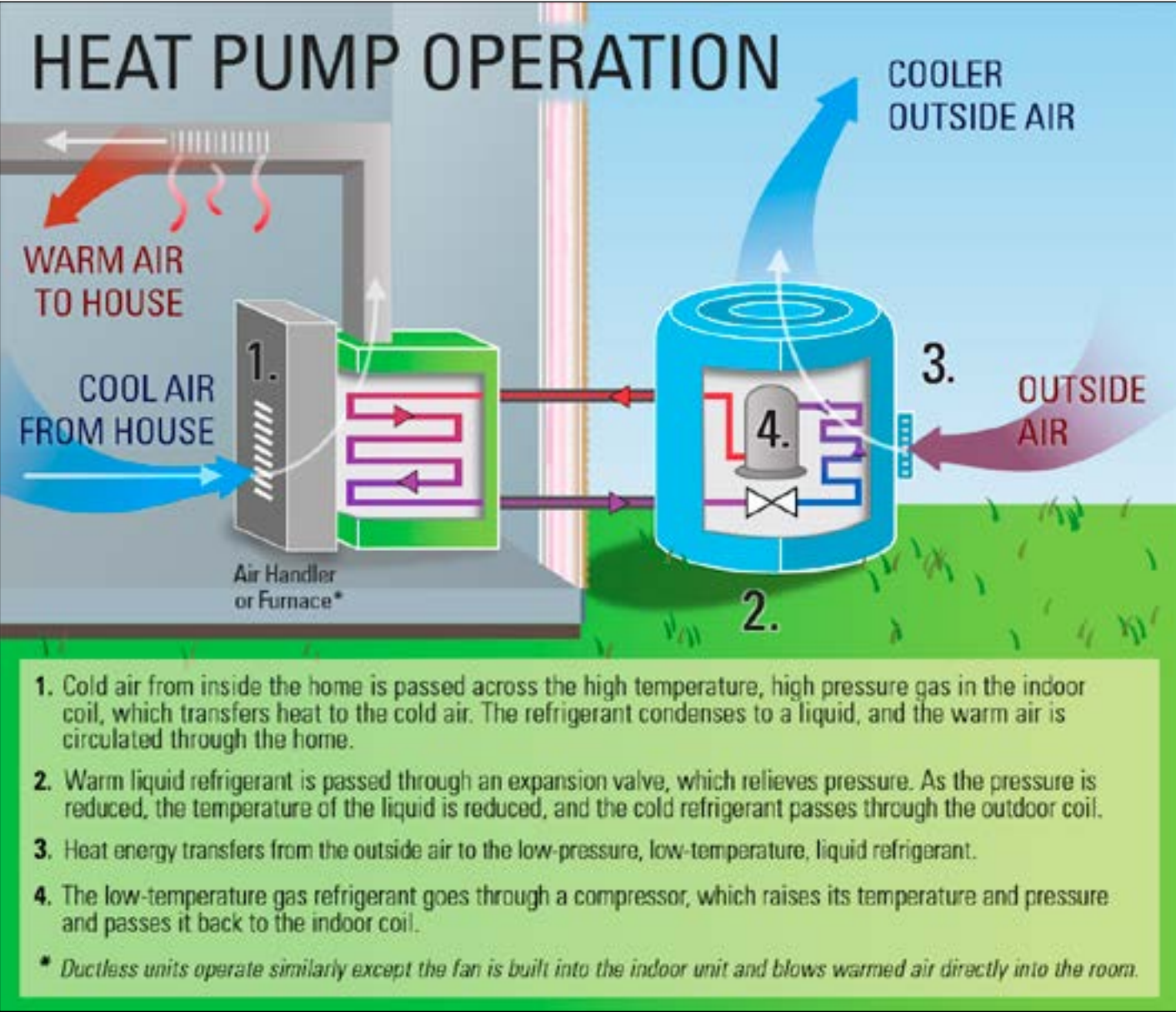
Policy Implications

This article is not intended as a comment on public policy. While some of the points made here are relevant to heat pump policy, there are many other considerations which have to be part of any discussion of policy. In particular, even if heat pump prices have risen and some heat pump measures have a very high cost-per-ton of carbon saved, continued heavy incentives may be fully justified by the need to provide clear and steady support for small businesses and individuals who are seeking to become heat pump suppliers or installers.

Feedback

Senator Brownsberger very much appreciates feedback and welcomes questions at william.brownsberger@masenate.gov or 617-771-8274 (cell).

Will Brownsberger is the senator for the Suffolk and Middlesex District of Massachusetts, which includes Belmont.



Mass Central Rail Trail Progresses in Waltham

By John Dieckmann

Construction of the Mass Central Rail Trail (MCRT) in Waltham has made considerable process this year. Grading and paving has been completed over the entire three mile trail from Beaver Street to Main Street. All work is essentially finished from Middlesex Circle, a few hundred yards west of Linden Street (Route 60) to Main Street, including a top coat of pavement, lane striping, guard rails where necessary, and road crossing markings and crossing signals. Amenities at road crossings include benches, bike racks, and stone columns identifying the road being crossed.

There are two bridges between Middlesex Circle and Beaver Street; a wooden trestle that crosses Beaver Brook and a steel truss bridge over Linden Street. This section has not been finished; it lacks a top coat of pavement, lane striping, etc. The work on the wooden bridge is complete, but the truss bridge's renovation doesn't appear to have been started. so official opening of the trail may await completion of this bridge.

Lyman Street has heavy traffic for much of the day and requires crossing signals. Those signals are operating.

The connection from Main Street, Waltham to Weston is the responsibility of the Massachusetts Department of Conservation and Recreation. The DCR expects detailed design work on this ¾ mile stretch to be ready to go out for construction bids next summer. The ¾ mile connection from Beaver Street to Belmont is currently has no construction date.

The trail has not opened officially, but the finished sections from Middlesex Circle, west, to Main Street are being used.

John Dieckmann is a director of the Belmont Citizens Forum.



A view of the trail looking west from Middlesex Circle, typical of the seven road crossings on the Mass Central Rail Trail in Waltham.



Steel truss bridge over Linden Street, Waltham.



Finished portion of the Mass Central Rail Trail in Waltham.



Waltham trailside bench.

Waltham Field Station Update

By John Dieckmann

The Waltham Fields Community Farm (WFCF) has been attempting to negotiate a lease for the continued use of the acreage at the former U Mass Field Station on Beaver Street. The Waltham City Council approved the lease on June 26. However, the conditions in the lease would have left the WCFC in a financially unsustainable condition, so WFCF is attempting to negotiate better terms. Unfortunately, there has been no movement from the city in response, leaving matters in limbo.

Meanwhile, WFCF has been operating its programs at a reduced scale. Stacey Daley, the executive director, expressed some optimism that matters would get resolved and the farm would be in operation next growing season. We will provide another update in next year's March-April Newsletter.

Bike Cameras Could Make Riding Safer

By Sumner Brown

Bicycling is not perfectly safe. Belmont’s approach to handling bicycles on roads is evolving, and some bicycle riders could improve their habits. But there is another problem that I have been thinking about after I spent three weeks in hospitals recovering from a hit-and-run bike incident: bicycle cameras.

While I was confined to Spauldingz Rehabilitation Hospital in Charlestown, I concluded that my mistake was that I did not have a camera on my bicycle that could have recorded what happened and the license plate of my attacker. (Incidentally, you can tell you were attacked during road rage if the vehicle honks-honks-honks for some seconds before hitting you.)

Bicycle cameras come in two varieties: front and rear. The cameras designed to face rearward can be mounted on seat posts and have red taillights built in that can blink or be turned off. The front cameras have a white light for riding after dark, and they easily mount on handlebars. I wanted a rear-facing camera because a rear camera would have had a clear view of the vehicle before the hit. After the hit, the usefulness of a forward-facing camera would have been unknowable.

At first I thought of using a GoPro camera, a forward-facing camera that mounts on a bike helmet or handlebars, but there are other cameras

available that have features exactly suited for recording bicycle incidents. In particular, they reuse the camera’s memory until the bicycle falls over. Then the last five minutes and the next five minutes of video are saved and locked. They cannot be overwritten until you delete them.

The camera I have is a Cycliq FLY6 GEN3, model CE603. My camera disappoints me in its ability to record license plates for two reasons. First, the camera’s resolution, 1920 x 1080 at 30 frames per second is spread out over a wide angle, 135 degrees. And second, most car drivers are polite so they give bicycles a wide clearance. When I ride past parked cars with adequate clearance, the camera does better at catching license plates. I hope to not get the ultimate test of recording a license plate when a vehicle hits me from the rear again.

The front-facing cameras from the same company, Cycliq, have image stabilization. This may be better at recording license plates. I will see. The present costs of cameras from Cycliq are \$319 for their front facing camera and \$239 for their rear facing camera.

Back when I was commuting from Belmont into Cambridge by bicycle in the 1970s through the 1990s, drivers were courteous and careful (although there was one incident when a driver somehow did not see me as they turned onto

Concord Avenue). I now get most of my exercise running, but my friends who are primarily bicyclists feel that some drivers’ temperaments have gotten unpleasant in the last six years.

If I had had a camera when I got hit, the camera would not have prevented my bleeding brain injury. So will bicycle cameras make you safer? My hope is that bicycle cameras will turn enough hit-and-run incidents into incarceration and financial damage stories so individuals that might be inclined to attack bicycles will reform themselves.

Sumner Brown is a director of the Belmont Citizens Forum.



Cycliq FLY6



Cycliq FLY6

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Vision for Belmont: Elizabeth Dionne 1

Opinion: Business-Friendly Zoning 8

Opinion: Property Tax Breaks 10

Profiles in Belmont: Joe Rancatore 12

Residents Restore Royal Road Woods 14

How to Make Decisions about Heat Pumps . . 17

Waltham Rail Trail Progresses 20

Waltham Fields Farm Update 21

Bike Cameras Make Biking Safer 22

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