



Analysis: New Revenue from Overlay Doubtful

By Michael Widmer and Ira Morgenstern

The Select Board has repeatedly claimed that the Belmont Center Overlay proposal will help address the town’s high property taxes and provide additional funding for our schools. Unfortunately, the proposal may actually cost the town money.

A little history is instructive. Starting a year ago, the Planning Board, working with the Office of Planning and Development, developed a zoning proposal for Belmont Center, which included a hotel on Concord Avenue. They produced a number of financial scenarios with a full buildout achieving \$3 million in annual net revenues for the town, with the hotel accounting for about three-fourths of the \$3 million. Although the Select Board chair acknowledged that a full buildout was a “magical scenario” at a meeting, the Select Board members continued to promote the \$3 million figure.

But at this point, the Select Board confronted a problem. The single overlay proposal would have required a two-thirds vote of Town Meeting, a high hurdle. So the Board decided to create a separate zoning proposal for the hotel, thereby asserting that the remaining center overlay proposal would require only a majority vote of Town Meeting.

However, by removing the hotel, the main revenue component disappeared. Town leaders are continuing to claim that the overlay will provide property tax relief and funding for the schools.

[Editor’s note: The Warrant Committee has released new projections which differ substantially from these estimates. Please see “Belmont Center Zoning: More Information,” p. 3]

The authors of this article, along with two others, all of whom are economic and financial analysts, have undertaken an extensive financial analysis of the center overlay proposal.

Our findings indicate the town would lose approximately \$250,000 a year if the overlay were fully built out. This does not include a hotel, which is now part of a separate proposed bylaw.

In broad strokes, the new revenues derive from additional residential and commercial property taxes, which are offset by new municipal and school costs. The taxes that are currently being paid by businesses in the center must then be deducted to reach a final number.

In the table, new annual revenues from residential and commercial property taxes total \$3.3 million. The revenues are offset by new annual costs

Project Estimated Residential Real Property Taxes	\$1,898,956
Project Est. Commercial Real & Personal Property Taxes	\$1,340,769
Estimated Motor Vehicle Taxes	\$37,144
NEW ANNUAL MUNICIPAL REVENUES	\$3,276,870
Residential Costs of Municipal Services	\$609,009
Commercial Costs of Municipal Services	\$181,764
Project Costs of Public Schools	\$1,843,151
NEW ANNUAL MUNICIPAL COSTS	\$2,633,924
NEW ANNUAL MUNICIPAL SURPLUS/(DEFICIT)	\$642,946
Less Existing Tax Revenue	\$898,682
Net Annual Surplus/(Deficit)	(\$255,736)

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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.

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of \$2.6 million, principally the \$1.8 million costs of additional school children. The resulting “surplus” of \$642,946 is then adjusted for existing tax revenues of \$898,682—producing a loss of \$255,736. And this does not account for any municipal infrastructure upgrades that will likely be required by the new construction, though these have not been evaluated by the town.

In making these calculations, there are three key variables that drive the final estimates: the apartment mix, the number of school-aged children, and the cost per school child.

To calculate apartment mix, we collected data on 43 developments located in Belmont and other neighboring and comparable towns, all of which were either built within the last 20 years or are detailed in recent town reports as being in advanced planning stages. The other towns included Arlington, Braintree, Lexington, Melrose, Newton, Watertown, and Wellesley.

Applying those data to a full buildout in Belmont Center, we estimate 408 apartments could be produced under the overlay, of which 7% would be studios, 46% one bedroom, 40% two bedrooms, and 7% three bedrooms.

Also using data from several surrounding communities (Arlington, Lexington, Newton, Watertown, and Wellesley), we developed weighted averages of school-aged children by unit size, with separate estimates for market-rate and affordable units. That produced a combined figure of 118 new school-aged students, or 29% of the 408 units. That seems like a very conservative estimate, given the enormous appeal of Belmont schools and the proximity of schools for all grade levels to Belmont Center. Obviously, if more students moved into the center apartments, the costs would be greater than we have estimated. The 29% is virtually identical to the 30% average estimated by the RKG consultants in their November 2024 report.

As the final step in calculating school costs, we examined Belmont’s school budget and estimated a cost per student of \$15,489 (using the fiscal 2026 budget). That number includes the costs of health care for school employees under the town’s shared services budget.

All these calculations are based on the current proposal, with the bottom two floors of commercial and all the higher stories (as many as three additional stories) residential. With a weak

Belmont Center Zoning: More Information

The analyses by the Office of Planning and Building(OPB) are very different from the figures published in this newsletter, and there is far more information available about the Project than can fit in the BCF’s print *Newsletter*. In the interest of fairness, we are providing links to analyses by the Office of Planning and Building and the Warrant Committee and alternative viewpoints on this proposal.

The town’s Belmont Center Zoning Project Site
www.belmont-ma.gov/2005/Belmont-Center-Zoning-Project

The Warrant Committee’s Belmont Center Overlay Fiscal Impact Analysis, which found that “the overall fiscal impact of developments built under the proposed Belmont Center Overlay District is likely to be positive”

bit.ly/BCF-Overlay-Fiscal

Supplementary material including an interview with the two largest Belmont Center landlords, a developer focus group convened by OPB director Chris Ryan, and a summary of the Select Board’s responses to project criticisms as stated at their January 26 meeting.

bit.ly/BCF-Overlay-Extra

commercial market, if the town were to adjust to only the first-floor commercial and the rest residential, the net loss to the town would rise dramatically. Following the same process used in the calculations above, one floor of commercial and the remainder residential would result in an annual loss of \$1 million in revenues to the town.

In conclusion, most likely, the overlay will actually worsen the town’s finances, forcing cuts in school and municipal services and/or larger property tax overrides.

Unfortunately, myths die hard, especially since the Select Board’s claims have an easy appeal in

these challenging times. The trouble is, if approved by Town Meeting, it will take years and a lot of pain to show the inaccuracy of these claims, and sadly, we will have lost the small-town scale of our center.

For more information about the sources for these calculations, please contact BelmontBetterZoning@gmail.com.

Michael Widmer served as Town Moderator from 2008 to 2025. Ira Morgenstern is a Precinct 7 Town Meeting member. Doug Koplou, Precinct 6 Town Meeting member, and Robert Sarno, Precinct 3 Town Meeting member, contributed to the research and reviewed this article.

Project Estimated Residential Real Property Taxes	\$2,783,994
Project Est. Commercial Real & Personal Property Taxes	\$738,367
Estimated Motor Vehicle Taxes	\$54,388
NEW ANNUAL MUNICIPAL REVENUES	\$3,576,749
Residential Costs of Municipal Services	\$891,906
Commercial Costs of Municipal Services	\$91,288
Project Costs of Public Schools	\$2,695,027
NEW ANNUAL MUNICIPAL COSTS	\$3,678,220
NEW ANNUAL MUNICIPAL SURPLUS/(DEFICIT)	(\$101,472)
Less Existing Tax Revenue	\$898,682
Net Annual Surplus/(Deficit)	(\$1,000,154)

Opinion What is a Town For?

By Meg Muckenhoupt

This issue contains an article by respected Belmont residents arguing that a proposed overlay district in Belmont Center will lead to a net loss to the town. Those calculations are at odds with the numbers produced by the Warrant Committee, which predict an annual net increase in town revenue between \$127,000 and \$857,00 (see bit.ly/BCF-Overlay-Fiscal). Which numbers you believe are more credible depends on your assumptions—chiefly assumptions about school enrollment.

Children cost towns money. They're expensive to educate, they like to play in parks that are expensive to maintain, and they increase the need for traffic enforcement to make sure they aren't imperiled by automobiles on their way to their expensive schools.

However, as many expectant couples learn, children's arrivals are not entirely predictable. In 2018, the Belmont Middle & High School Building Committee predicted that by 2024, there would be 4,900 students in Belmont Public Schools. As of this school year, there are 4,433, according to the Massachusetts Department of Education. More than

450 anticipated children have not appeared. A 2024 forecast predicted that Belmont's school population will decrease by another 171 students by 2029.

Most towns could balance their budgets handily if they could forbid families from moving into the town, something which developers functionally accomplish when they build studio and one-bedroom apartments. But it isn't legal to bar families outright, or to refuse to provide public schools. The citizens of the Commonwealth of Massachusetts decided long ago that it is necessary to educate all children for our society to survive.

Towns exist because people also decided long ago (in Belmont's case, in 1859) that a town is a useful way to provide services, resolve disputes, and make decisions about land use. Belmont, like all other Massachusetts municipalities, gained the power "to limit the construction and use of buildings," i.e. zoning, in 1920.

Since then, the state has attempted several times to intervene to stop towns from limiting housing construction via zoning, including 1946's Emergency Housing Commission, Chapter 40B in 1969, and the 2021 MBTA Communities Act. The

consistent problem the state is trying to solve is that individual communities in Massachusetts have no incentive to add to their housing stock, and often use zoning to prevent new construction.

New housing is troublesome for towns. The buildings block the view, beloved trees are uprooted, and the residents require more sewers, roads, and firefighters. Residents often decry a change in the town's "character," or a potential decline in property values.

Since 1920, residents in dozens of communities in greater Boston have zoned for short houses, or large lots, or single-family-only areas. These communities have managed to essentially halt building in much of the state since 1970. This kind of zoning might help explain why Belmont's population is virtually the same as it was in 1950, while Massachusetts's population has increased by 50%.

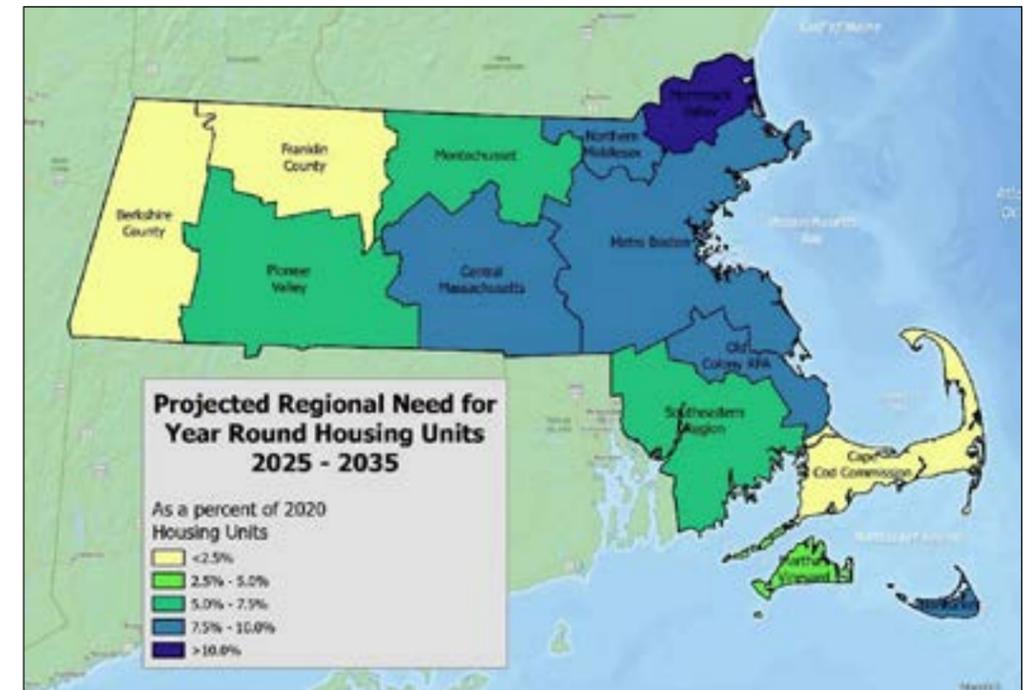
That's unfortunate, because multiple studies show that building new market-rate housing slows the growth of local rents. Sometimes it reduces rents in the surrounding area. By throttling the housing supply, Greater Boston has made housing more expensive on purpose, one town at a time.

Unsurprisingly, Massachusetts's housing shortage has festered for decades. To house our state's predicted population, we need to add 222,000 homes over the next 10 years; in 2024, only 14,338 housing units were permitted in the state.

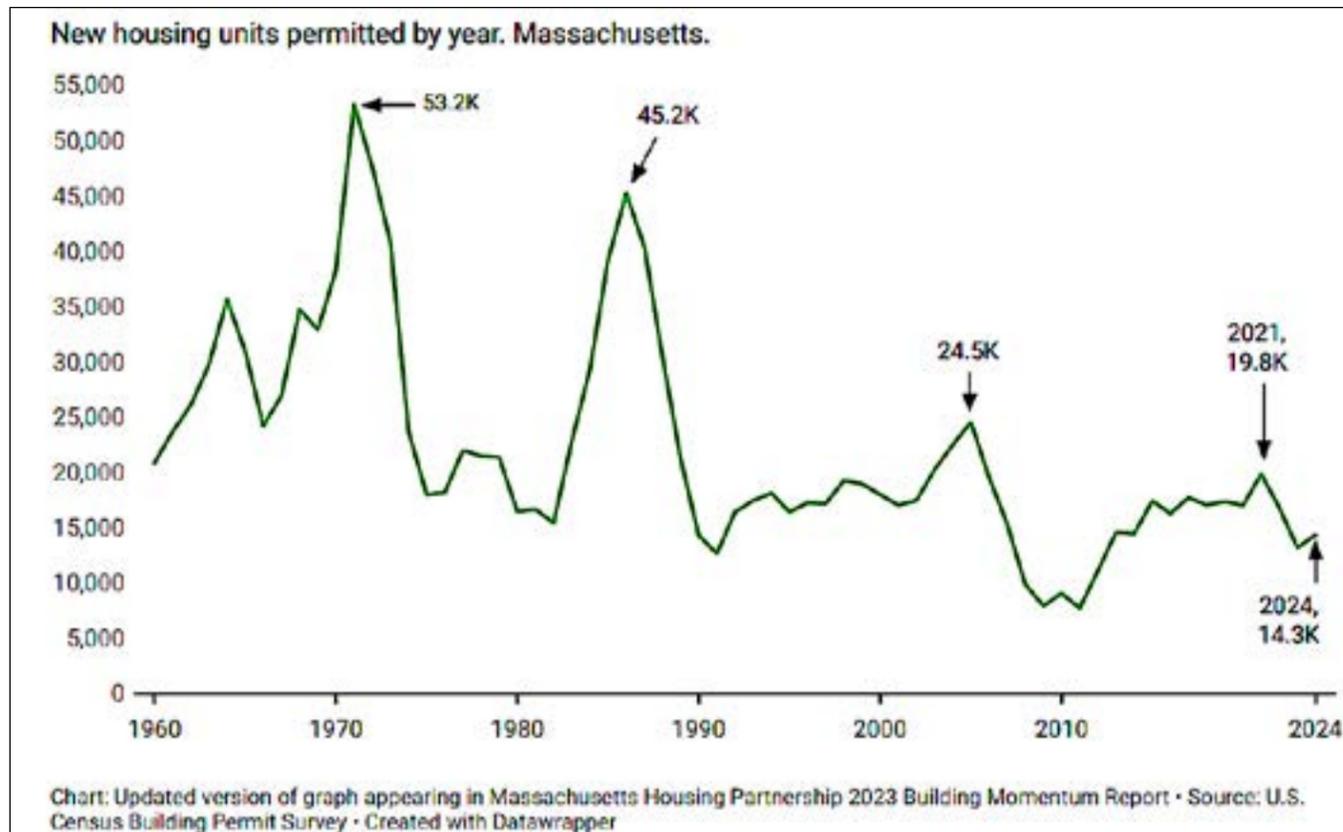
The housing shortage and high housing prices are major reasons Massachusetts annually sees net out-migration of about 20,000 to 30,000 people ages 25–54 to other states. These are people of prime working age who pay taxes.

Of course, a lot of people ages 25–54 have children. Children are expensive.

The authors of the accompanying analysis suggest that the overlay district is a bad idea because it might require current Belmont residents to pay



Source: [Massachusetts' Comprehensive Housing Plan, 2025-2029](#).



Source: [Greater Boston Housing Report Card 2025](#), The Boston Foundation.

higher taxes to educate more children. In that scenario, the function of a town is to protect the current residents from potential demands from new residents. That is one theory of a town.

Yet there are other theories of town government. A town could also value future residents and their interests. These are people who could come to Belmont and pay taxes, spend money at local businesses, pick up trash at trail cleanups, perhaps even run for Town Meeting. They could become treasured members of the community, if they had a place to live.

As long as residents see towns as fortresses designed to exclude outsiders, and zoning as a tool to control taxes, Massachusetts's housing crisis will continue, and young adults, their families, and their tax revenues will leave the state.

Soon, Town Meeting will vote on the Belmont Center overlay. I hope that Town Meeting members think clearly about Belmont's past, and Massachusetts' future, and what this town could and should be. And I hope they think of the children, who are expensive, and unpredictable, and necessary.

Meg Muckenhoupt is executive editor of the Belmont Citizens Forum Newsletter.

Belmont Could Tax Land Differently

By Max Colice

Town Meeting changed Belmont’s zoning bylaws last year to allow new housing development and is considering more zoning changes to allow new commercial development, partly in an effort to increase property tax revenue. But simply changing the zoning doesn’t guarantee more development or higher property tax revenue. How else can Belmont encourage new housing construction and commercial development?

One very old idea for encouraging development is the Land Value Tax. Instead of taxing both land and buildings like the current property tax, a Land Value Tax applies only to land, not to the buildings. Under a Land Value Tax, an empty lot would be taxed the same as an equivalent lot with buildings on it.

Adam Smith, David Ricardo, James Mill, and

The unimproved value of land depends in large part on what the property owner is allowed to do with it—the uses permitted by the zoning, in other words. Land is more valuable when zoning allows more profitable uses. For example, a lot that can support a larger home, more homes, or multifamily housing will generally be worth more than an equivalent lot that can be used only for a smaller single-family home.

Switching to a Land Value Tax would require a change in state law and so is unlikely to happen any time soon. But considering how land is valued in Belmont does suggest how recent zoning changes could increase land values and how property taxes are distributed among Belmont property owners. Belmont’s land values show this difference clearly.

Consider the average assessed value per square foot of the land in Belmont’s five different

Zoning	Permitted Use(s)	Allowed Min. Lot Size (sq ft)	Actual Median Lot Size (sq ft)	Average Assessed Land Value (per sq ft)
SR A	Single Family	25,000	18,784	\$ 32.63
SR B	Single Family	12,000	9,286	\$ 62.33
SR C	Single Family	9,000	7,307	\$ 95.33
SR D	Single Family	25,000	987,505	\$ 14.06
GR	Single Family, Two Family	5,000	4,046	\$ 95.16

Average assessed land values, allowed minimum lot sizes, actual median lot sizes, and permitted uses for Belmont’s main residential zoning districts Source: Belmont Real Estate Database (belmont.jfryan.net)

John Stuart Mill all argued that taxing only land would motivate property owners to put their vacant and underused land to more profitable use rather than letting it remain idle or underused. In the late 19th century, Henry George promoted the Land Value Tax based in part on the idea that landowners benefit disproportionately from public infrastructure improvement, such as roads and sewers, and should therefore pay a larger share of their cost. Even Milton Friedman acknowledged that “the least bad tax is the property tax on the unimproved value of land,” i.e., a Land Value Tax.

residential zoning districts. In the Single Residence (SR) C district, the minimum lot size is nearly three times smaller than the minimum lot size in the SR A district, and the average land value per square foot is nearly three times higher! Put differently, land in the SR C district is more valuable per square foot in part because it is zoned for more homes per square foot than land in the SR A district.

Mapping the assessed land value per square foot shows that this trend carries across all of Belmont, with more areas zoned for denser development having much higher assessed land values (per



Assessed land value per square foot for each parcel in Belmont (darker shading indicates higher value). Source: Belmont Real Estate Database (belmont.jfryan.net/) and Mass GIS Data Hub (bit.ly/BCF-GIS).

square foot) than areas zoned for sparser development:

In particular, the land in the 3A Overlay District—most of which was previously zoned as General Residence (GR) or SR C—should increase in value now that it can be used for multifamily housing and mixed-use developments. This increase in land value won’t count as new growth and so won’t increase the total amount of property tax that Belmont collects, but it will shift more of the property tax burden onto the owners of these 3A parcels. If the historical economists Adam Smith, David Ricardo, James Mill, John Stuart Mill, and Henry George were right, these increases in land values and property taxes should incentivize development in the 3A Overlay District.

This suggests that reducing the minimum lot size in the SR A, B, and D districts should incentivize even more development and justify increasing the assessed values of land in these districts. Changing

the zoning and assessments in the SR A, B, and D districts would not increase Belmont’s total property tax revenue, but it would unlock potential small-scale development in a large swath of Belmont and shift a portion of the tax burden away from the SR C and GR districts. And because many lots in these districts are smaller than the minimum lot size, this change would also align the zoning and assessments with the actual use, reducing the administrative burden associated with renovation and construction for both homeowners and Belmont officials (See “Belmont’s Zoning Should Match Actual Use,” *BCF Newsletter*,

January/February 2023).

Although shifting the zoning—and the assessed land values—would not increase total property tax revenue, it would shift the tax burden in a way that reflects actual use. In the SR A, B, C, and GR districts, the actual median lot sizes are all significantly smaller than the permitted minimum lot sizes. Reducing the minimum lot sizes, e.g., to the median lot sizes, should increase the land values in proportion to the corresponding increase in permitted housing density. Districts that experience higher increases in permitted housing density should experience correspondingly higher increases in land values. This would shift the tax burden away from property owners in the SR C and GR districts and towards property owners in the SR A, B, and D districts.

Max Colice is a Belmont resident.

Select Board Candidate Answers BCF Questions

Each year, the Belmont Citizens Forum asks candidates for town-wide office questions about issues facing Belmont. As of this publication Carol Berberian is the sole candidate running for Select Board. If another candidate emerges, see BelmontCitizensForum.org for their answers.

BCF

How do you propose to address Belmont's structural fiscal challenges, and what specific budget or revenue strategies would you champion as a Select Board member?

Berberian

Belmont can build on the work of the Multi-Year Budget Advisory Committee to strengthen its financial future through realistic long-term planning and spending decisions that align with sustainable revenue. I will work to expand shared services, increase energy efficiency, and evaluate new initiatives based on long-term operating impact. I will continue to advocate for analysis of increased spending, review of town-owned assets, and strategic economic development.

BCF

Belmont's tax base is roughly 95% residential and 5% commercial, a ratio that has changed little for decades. Do you believe that it is realistic to attempt to materially increase the commercial portion?

Berberian

We absolutely can materially increase our commercial tax base in Belmont. Our goals need to be focused on value, not just volume. Belmont needs a comprehensive, long-term strategy to manage traffic and parking effectively. I will work to attract high-quality uses that generate stable tax revenue, support existing local businesses, and encourage positive activity in our town. Small shifts can make a meaningful difference over time. Reducing outdated restrictions on businesses through zoning changes is essential. As the vice chair of the Planning Board, I spoke on numerous initiatives that support this objective. These proposals will help increase our commercial tax base while preserving the value of our community.



PHOTO COURTESY OF CAROL BERBERIAN

Carol Berberian

BCF

What is your vision for Belmont's future look, feel, atmosphere, and quality of life—how residents live, learn, work, and connect, and what two or three concrete policy decisions would you prioritize in your first term to move the town toward that vision?

Berberian

My vision for Belmont is a town that embraces and celebrates the many cultures, backgrounds, and identities that make up our community, while fostering an environment where everyone feels respected and valued. By working together, we can address the diverse needs of our town and achieve a thoughtful balance of commercial development, environmental protection, and continued support for our Housing Production Plan. Belmont can advance its Climate Action Plan by integrating climate goals into capital planning, prioritizing energy efficiency, and strengthening sustainability for future generations. I am committed to transparency, balanced representation, and respectful communication that brings our community together.



TIM TODREAS

BCF

Zoning reform and compliance with state housing laws, including the MBTA Communities Act, are reshaping development patterns in town. How would you balance requirements for additional housing and economic development with preserving Belmont's small-town feel, natural resources, and historic character?

Berberian

Belmont will soon see our first project approved under the MBTA zoning built in Waverley Square. I am grateful for the work of the MBTA Communities Advisory Committee and all who worked on this zoning. I am proud of my work on these initiatives in my time on the Planning Board. I maintained a commitment to accuracy and transparency, advocated for the inclusion of Belmont Corner, and helped create the map that Town Meeting agreed was the best option for our town.

For our Accessory Dwelling Unit zoning, I did extensive research on neighboring communities, worked with the Age Friendly Action Committee, and provided significant direction for the creation of the new regulations. I believe another key to balancing the needs of the community is age restricted zoning. I advocated for two lots zoned for 55+ zoning to be included in the Belmont Center Overlay, yet this was not embraced by others. We have a higher population of seniors, combined with a higher concentration of larger housing units,

and this creates an opportunity to consider including this in future plans.

BCF

Large private and institutional developments, such as those related to McLean Hospital or commercial centers, can strain traffic, infrastructure, and neighborhood quality of life. What principles would guide your decision-making on major development proposals, and how would you ensure that benefits and impacts are fairly shared across the community?

Berberian

Large private and institutional developments can bring real benefits to Belmont when they are planned

thoughtfully, reviewed transparently, and focused on long-term community benefit. As an alternate member of the Planning Board in 2023, I was one of the "NO" votes on the Belmont Hill School parking lot and advocated for a more collaborative approach that would better serve the community. Concerns regarding pedestrian safety and environmental impact were not fully addressed in that proposal, and I felt we missed an opportunity. Public safety, traffic problems, parking, and potential environmental impacts always need to be considered.

As the vice chair of the Planning Board that reviewed the most recent McLean proposal, I was part of this more positive conversation that addressed community concerns while encouraging collaboration on this tax-positive development. We listened to feedback from residents, the police and fire departments, DPW, and other department heads to identify all potential impacts of the project. Proposals must be evaluated for true economic impact, infrastructure capacity, and overall impact on the residents.

BCF

Belmont has invested significant time and effort in the Belmont Community Path and safer bicycle and pedestrian networks. How do you view the role of these projects in the town's transportation and climate strategy, and what would be your priorities for completing and connecting them?

Berberian

The investment in the Belmont Community Path and safer walking and biking networks plays an important role in our transportation and climate strategy. The Belmont Community Path Project Committee continues to demonstrate exceptional dedication and perseverance in advancing this complex project. Belmont students in grades 4-12 start their school day at the same time in the morning and this high level of volume creates a challenge that should be reviewed. Belmont has experienced a troubling number of pedestrian and bicycle accidents highlighting the need for improving safety.

BCF

The Belmont Citizens Forum emphasizes preserving natural and historical resources such as Lone Tree Hill and Rock Meadow. What are the most important environmental or open-space decisions facing the town in the next few years, and how would you approach funding and managing these areas as a Select Board member?

Berberian

As a Select Board member, I would work with the Conservation Commission, Energy Committee, Open Space & Recreation Plan Advisory Committee, and others to align long-term

goals with realistic funding plans. I will support reviewing zoning, pursuing state and federal grants and working towards decisions to benefit future generations. It is important to balance increased public use and enjoyment while protecting Belmont's open spaces.

BCF

Looking ahead to the end of your first term on the Select Board, what concrete outcomes or measurable changes, whether in finances, development, transportation, or environmental protection, would you hope residents could point to as evidence that your leadership has improved Belmont?

Berberian

My goal is for residents to have greater confidence and trust in the Select Board. We need to respect the independence of our committees, encourage thoughtful debate, and value differing perspectives. Clear, transparent, and consistent leadership will build trust. That trust is essential to earning broad community support for future initiatives that will benefit Belmont. I am committed to strengthening our finances, supporting local businesses, encouraging responsible development, and protecting neighborhood character to make Belmont more vibrant, welcoming, and resilient for the next generation.

Letter to the Editor

To the editor;

As the founder of Arlington MA Invasives ArMI, I read your recent post about the need to coordinate invasive plant management [[“Opinion: Treat Invasive Plant Removal as a System,” BCF Newsletter, January/February 2026](#)] with interest. You mention the need to work across jurisdictions. Absolutely! Yet there are systemic roadblocks to making that happen.

It has been my experience that the slicing and dicing of “owners” of town lands can create significant hurdles to coordinating actions, even in contiguous town lands being stewarded by different departments, boards, or commissions as “owners.”

Effective invasives control is complicated where private lands abut public properties. And difficulties coordinating efforts are amplified further where town land abuts state-owned lands. The state often

simply answers “No” to requests to remove invasives on state land.

I'm wondering whether you have shared your excellent piece with State Representative Dave Rogers, whose proposed Invasives Bill could create the state structure capable of breaking through these systemic jurisdictional barriers, toward achieving the coordination you and I envision. It would be wonderful to develop the common vision that improving the lands we all steward is important for posterity, town, private, and state lands alike.

Thanks for writing this,
Elaine Crowder, PhD

Arlington Town Meeting Member
Founder, Arlington MA Invasives ArMI

Moderator Candidates Answer BCF Questions

Each year, the Belmont Citizens Forum asks candidates for town-wide office questions about issues facing Belmont. This year, Adam Dash and Mike Crowley are running for town moderator.

BCF

The moderator has broad authority over Town Meeting. How do you define the moderator's core responsibilities in Belmont, and what principles would guide your exercise of that responsibility, particularly in contentious debates?

Adam Dash

I have the experience and skills to carry out the three main functions of the town moderator: (i) run large hybrid meetings, (ii) render legal rulings, and (iii) make committee appointments.

I have done all three things as an attorney handling municipal law matters for over 35 years, and in my role on the Select Board for six years (2017-2023), including two years as chair. I have a track record of successfully moderating contentious meetings that allow all views to be shared while making sure that people are respectful of each other. I would bring this experience and understanding of the underlying bases of articles before Town Meeting to the role of moderator. One cannot make a ruling on the scope of an article before Town Meeting without fully understanding the article's subject matter.

I will provide a space where all views are aired, where all rulings are unbiased and legally correct, and where all Town Meeting members are clear on what is being discussed and voted on.

I pledge to foster a legislative branch that runs smoothly, fairly, and represents all residents.

Mike Crowley

As Moderator, I (1) plan and preside over Town Meeting in a fair and impartial manner and (2) appoint skilled, thoughtful residents to key committees that shape Belmont's long-term decisions.

My guiding principle in presiding over Town Meeting is neutrality. I will not use my authority to steer Town Meeting to any particular outcome. Town Meeting members are elected to make that choice. In practice, this means applying procedural

rules fairly and ensuring an equitable process for debate: allowing speaking time for proponents and opponents, giving the Select Board and other town committees sufficient time to communicate their positions and recommendations, and ensuring Town Meeting members' right to speak. A moderator who steers outcomes undermines both the legitimacy of the vote and Town Meeting itself.

In making committee appointments, I pay attention to relevant skills and interests of potential appointees. I also strive to maintain a diversity of background and perspectives in my appointments.

BCF

How will you maintain visible impartiality in managing debate? Would there ever be an occasion where you would abandon neutrality?

Mike Crowley

Impartiality begins with respect. I treat every Town Meeting member—regardless of viewpoint—with the same courtesy, attentiveness, and respect. There must be opportunities for all views to be heard. That's the essential responsibility of the moderator at Town Meeting.

Abandoning neutrality is never appropriate. The moderator's credibility depends on it, especially in contentious debates.

Adam Dash

I would be more than just visibly impartial as moderator. I would be completely impartial, which would include not being involved in submitting articles or citizen petitions to Town Meeting, and not showing favoritism. The role of Moderator is similar to that of a judge or referee who makes legal rulings and empowers Town Meeting members to make decisions.

BCF

Former moderator Michael Widmer, in an effort to enforce civility, prohibited Town Meeting members from engaging in ad hominem attacks on town bodies or officials. Others have argued that this violates free speech. Where do you stand on this issue?

Mike Crowley

This rarely is a real issue. Town Meeting members are overwhelmingly respectful of one another, committee members, town staff, and elected officials.

I witnessed one striking exception several years ago. During a debate over an amendment to address a school funding shortfall, a Select Board member publicly lambasted proponents as “traitors.” Had I been the moderator then, I would have intervened because that outburst was inflammatory and deeply disrespectful.

On the other hand, the former moderator called out of order a Town Meeting member who suggested that the Town’s leadership would prefer it if Town Meeting members deferred to them when making decisions. I don’t consider this observation an ad hominem attack, disrespectful, or inflammatory.

Town Meeting members must be able to express strong views about the merits of policies and decisions. And strong views can be expressed with civility.

Adam Dash

I had three rules as Select Board chair: Do not waste people’s time. No drama. No personal attacks.

I would bring these rules to Town Meeting. We can argue our points strongly, and we can still be friends and neighbors.

In general, if you need to personally attack your opponent to prevail, then you likely do not have a strong argument in favor of your position.

BCF

Belmont has begun experimenting with hybrid and remote Town Meetings, in part to make participation easier. But in the most recent Town Meetings, fewer than half the members attended in person, jeopardizing the distinct advantages of in-person meetings in building community. How would you manage this tension, allowing for greater access through hybrid but preserving the more robust deliberations of in-person meetings?

Adam Dash

Hybrid meetings in Belmont have been in place for years for Town Meetings and other bodies, and I am glad they are here to stay. Hybrid meetings allow many people to be part of town governance who are



PHOTO COURTESY OF MIKE CROWLEY

Mike Crowley

not otherwise able to serve their community. They allow people to participate no matter where they are or whatever their circumstances may be. I support keeping Town Meeting hybrid.

Mike Crowley

Hybrid Town Meetings are no longer an experiment. We and other Massachusetts communities have proven they work. Many Town Meeting members attended our last Special Town Meeting in October remotely. Yet debate was vigorous, voting was reliable, and Town Meeting members had every opportunity to speak.

Recognize what hybrid access has achieved. Parents with young children, seniors, caretakers, residents with disabilities, and those who travel for work can now participate in Town Meeting. This broader participation strengthens—not weakens—democracy by making Town Meeting more reflective of our community.

While in-person interaction remains valuable, access and inclusion must be prioritized.



PHOTO COURTESY OF ADAM DASH

Adam Dash

BCF

Town Meeting increasingly faces complex articles on finance, zoning, and large capital projects, where both clarity and fairness in debate are critical. What specific tools or practices (e.g., speaking limits, structured pro/con presentations, educational sessions) would you use to make debate both efficient and genuinely informative for members and the public?

Mike Crowley

Town Meeting has always faced complex issues; this is nothing new. The key for the moderator is preparation and structure, as well as regular communication with Town Meeting members. On the latter, I email Town Meeting members frequently to keep them apprised of information and developments related to Town Meeting, and more frequently than we’ve seen in the past.

Ahead of each Town Meeting, I meet and work with the Select Board and citizen petitioners to provide clear, accessible materials to help Town Meeting members understand the proposals before them. I strongly encourage Town Meeting members to attend Warrant Briefings. I also encourage

precincts to organize caucuses in advance of Town Meeting.

Town Meeting members speak to the pros and cons of issues; they also make amendments, or move to postpone or dismiss articles, which affords another opportunity to discuss potential cons.

Ensuring Town Meeting members understand procedures is critical for maintaining a fair and civil debate, as well. I developed a simplified procedures guide (www.belmont-ma.gov/DocumentCenter/View/1936/Moderator-Letter-Describing-Town-Meeting-Procedure-PDF) for Town Meeting members to help them better understand how to navigate Town Meeting.

Adam Dash

I want to make sure that Town Meeting members have the knowledge and tools to make the complex decisions facing us. I plan to hold regular office hours (as I did when I was on the Select Board) and education sessions. I will keep the discussion moving in a productive manner during Town Meeting, while respecting people’s right to speak and fully participate.

The key to productive debate is clear communication. I would ensure that Town Meeting members are clear on what is being voted on before voting begins on each article. Clarity and consistency are the key to a Town Meeting that is fair and where everyone feels they have been heard.

I will prepare new Town Meeting members for service by pairing them with established Town Meeting members, and by providing training before they begin. I once wrote instructions for new Warrant Committee members on how to review the town budget so they could get up to speed quickly; and as moderator, I will make sure that new Town Meeting members are likewise ready to go on day one of Town Meeting.

BCF

The moderator appoints members to powerful committees such as the Warrant Committee and building committees, which have a significant influence on important town policies. What criteria would you use for these appointments, and how would you seek out diverse perspectives and under-represented voices?

Adam Dash

It is important for committees to include different perspectives to represent the community and make fully informed decisions. The Warrant Committee needs subject matter experts in finance, law, and human resources, among other areas, to be able to debate, vote and make recommendations on articles regarding budget, zoning and pension matters, just as Building Committees need architects, lawyers, builders and finance experts to do their work. Having served on those committees, I have a deep understanding of what they need.

It is important for committees to reflect Belmont as a whole, including gender, race, economic status, and geographic area in town. I brought in people from all backgrounds in my appointment of about 500 people to over 60 committees while on the Select Board, and will continue to do so as moderator. I even wrote the Select Board’s committee appointment rules to make those appointments fair and unbiased.

Mike Crowley

Finding residents to serve on committees occupies much of my time because it’s important work. I look for relevant skills, a willingness to do the work, and a commitment to problem-solving. I also try to ensure that we have diversity, including that we draw appointees from across precincts, and have a greater variety of viewpoints and experience.

The Warrant Committee illustrates the challenge. With a professional finance and budgeting background, I have focused on boosting the Warrant Committee’s analytical skills. Belmont has no shortage of residents with expertise in finance, economics, and data analysis, but many are already overcommitted. Finding skilled volunteers requires sustained outreach—a process that can take months.

I am proud of the results so far. In addition to reappointing some experienced members, I have appointed three new Warrant Committee members who bring strong analytical skills and fresh perspectives. All three are parents of young children, one of the many groups historically under-represented on the committee.

BCF

The creation of a Moderator’s Advisory Committee is a recent step, but it has had some initial stumbles. Would you use such a committee, and, if so, to what

extent would its recommendations shape your decisions?

Mike Crowley

While it took time for precincts to select representatives, the Moderator’s Advisory Committee has been a valuable step toward greater transparency for the Town moderator—a role that has historically operated with little or no transparency around actions like committee appointments or Town Meeting planning.

The committee advises me on Town Meeting procedures and potential committee appointments, and I value their thoughtful and constructive input, which meaningfully informs my decisions. The committee is an essential sounding board that I plan to make permanent.

Adam Dash

If I ask people to serve on a committee, I want to make good use of their time.

The Moderator’s Advisory Committee does not have an official document outlining in detail the committee’s purpose. I would start by doing what I did for the committees I created on the Select Board, which is to draft a document outlining the Committee’s role, how members are chosen, and what their terms of service are. None of that currently exists.

The committee could take on specific projects with deliverables and timeframes to pursue opportunities that enhance the operation of our legislative branch and better serve the community. I have watched the committee’s meetings, and I believe members would have a more satisfying and impactful volunteer experience if their roles were clear, tangible and action-based.

BCF

Looking ahead to the end of your first term as moderator, what specific, observable changes in Town Meeting’s culture, procedures, or accessibility would you hope Town Meeting members and residents could point to as evidence that you have strengthened Belmont’s representative town meeting government?

Adam Dash

I have a one-year plan available on my website, adamdashformoderator.com to make Town Meeting work better. Members will feel like they have been heard and their time has been well used.

I will support civic education by holding citizen budget forums, and bringing Town Meeting into the schools by having a Model Town Meeting where students can debate a sample article as Town Meeting and Select Board Members with me as Moderator.

Belmont’s legislative decision-making will be stronger with vibrant, active, fair, and efficient Town Meetings. These are the kinds of successful large meetings I have run for 35 years in Belmont and professionally as an attorney.

Belmont deserves a Town Meeting which is a robust, co-equal branch of government, but this requires a moderator with the skills and experience to help Town Meeting be at its best. I am running to help Town Meeting be just that.

Mike Crowley

I am especially proud of three accomplishments.

First, Town Meeting is now hybrid by default, dramatically expanding access for residents. Our hybrid Town Meetings have proceeded seamlessly with few hiccups, solid attendance, and have begun to make Town Meeting more representative of the diversity of our community.

Second, the creation of the Moderator’s Advisory Committee has brought much-needed transparency to critical decisions about Town Meeting process and moderator appointments. The committee made good on my campaign promise to bring transparency and public accountability to a position that has operated with little.

Third, the tone of Town Meeting has improved. By fairly moderating discussions, treating all Town Meeting members equally and encouraging respectful debate, Town Meeting has become a more civil and effective town legislature.

Join us in Stewarding Lone Tree Hill!

The Belmont Citizens Forum, in conjunction with the Judy Record Conservation Fund, is holding its 12th annual cleanup and trail maintenance day on Saturday, April 25, from 9 AM until noon.

Help with the plantings near the Meadow Edge Trail, cleaning up and removal of invasives at the Mill Street parking lot and the Coal Road, respectively. Students can earn community service credits.

Bounded by Concord Avenue, Pleasant Street, and Mill Street, Lone Tree Hill spans 119 acres of permanently protected conservation land and is available to everyone.

Lone Tree Hill is stewarded through a public/private partnership by the town and McLean Hospital, and is managed by the Land Management Committee.

For more information, email bcfprogramdirector@gmail.com or go to the website: bit.ly/BCF-LTH-2026



PHOTO: JEANNE MOONEY

Profile in Belmont: Joe Arkinstall

By Elissa Ely

You open the door of The Wellington Tavern and are seated. Soon after, a man comes by to welcome you. His accent is richly British and he is winningly attentive. You find him familiar. Once the beloved co-owner of Stone Hearth Pizza, Joe Arkinstall is the manager here, now. Unless it's Sunday morning, he will almost always find you. Sunday mornings are for family church. "It keeps the soul nice and clean," he says.

Restaurant management is a profession of perpetual motion: overseeing front-of-the-house cleanliness and appearance; overseeing back-of-the-house payroll, inventory, staff schedules, supplies; meeting with the head chef and owners. Endless logistical brushfires need dousing. (On the other hand, there are Wellington steak tips, and a tomato soup that tastes "absolutely gorgeous.") Days are 10 to 12 hours long, but at the end of them, there is "a good fatigue."

A manager's mandate, in Joe's view, is also "bringing a culture. It's a brotherhood atmosphere, treating the dishwasher and the bartender and the owner the same—no bad blood, no bickering. If something happens on a shift and an employee feels unhappy, we jump on it and take care of it right away. The culture will ooze onto the floor, customers will feel it, and they'll come back."

Usually, we understand someone's life through its timeline. In this case, it would be more useful to understand Joe's life through its geography, tracing his movements between continents. There have been many.

He was born to British parents in Switzerland, one of five close siblings (he lives downstairs from his sister). "I was a wild child," he recalls, sounding a little pleased. The Arkinstall kids skied together, hiked together, got lost in the backcountry together. Relocating for their parents' work, the family always had one another, and they still do.

He went to schools in France until, with his father's promotion to a Boston biotech company, they moved en bloc to Belmont. "The choice was between Lexington and Belmont," he says. "My mom liked the name Belmont. It sounded French."



Joe Arkinstall

PHOTO COURTESY OF JOE ARKINSTALL

Middle school is always rough entry, especially from another country, yet some of Joe's closest friends are still from Chenery. Belmont High School was different, at least at first. "I had to reprogram my ADD brain," he remembers, "It was hard within four walls."

After a teacher caught him in the hallway tossing a rugby ball with friends, one happy result was cofounding the Belmont High rugby team. Next thing the boys knew, they were learning the game from their newly appointed coach, Joe was recruiting friends and the friends of friends, and a team was born. His playing days are over, but his high school rugby loyalty is strong. "They're crushing it," he says, with no attempt to dampen his ardor. "You'll definitely hear me in the stands, and see me in the bleachers. I still have one of the stolen jerseys."

Some of his family lived in the Welsh mountains, and England felt like home when Joe moved there for college and graduate school. Academic demands there scaled up quickly. "It was like releasing a manual clutch," he says. "Not gradual, but 'let's go—10-page essay due Tuesday!'"

Joe knew he wanted to be in marketing and sales; it fit his temperament and sociable gifts. In business school, he volunteered with a South African nonprofit. His placement was in a small coastal town that was scrambling back after the 2008 recession had demolished their tourist industry.

Joe had ideas: one was to remanufacture recyclable waste into flip-flops, attractive pots, clothing—the kind of goods that would tempt slowly returning tourists and provide jobs for the locals. "University is a bubble, but this was an amazing way to pop it," he says. "Here was the real world facing you, looking you dead in the eyes." Looking back was profitable for the town, life-changing for him.

Back in Belmont—for Belmont had become home—Joe joined a different real world in a series of traditional sales and marketing jobs. "They put you in a grey booth with a squeaky chair to do the same thing day in and day out. It drove me mad. I need social interaction for fuel." The fit with his sociability and temperament was poor.

COVID-19 was catastrophic for the country, but an opportunity for him. His sister co-owned Stone Hearth and in 2020, 10 months into the pandemic, Joe and a friend bought out the other co-owner (who, in the small world that is Belmont Center, also owned Champion Sports.) Here was the fit. "We had something, we really had something," he says. "Stone Hearth opened the door. It was almost a homecoming."

Creative survival strategies were imperative. They changed menu items, changed hours, hosted outdoor dining where alcohol was allowed, built a customer base from Joe's school friends and the parents of school friends, delivered food themselves.

He was cashier, waiter, and dishwasher, sometimes all at once, up at 5 AM for supplies, and building the dynamic culture between staff and employees that he believed in; a brotherhood that oozed out welcomingly to customers. "We had the community on our side."

The pandemic came under control, but 25 years of operation took its toll on the restaurant. First, the

air conditioning died. Then ingredient costs rose, and the threat of governmental tariffs loomed. "It was sad, very very sad. We couldn't keep the credit cards from going out. It chipped away at our little savings."

When the last piece of large equipment broke irreplaceably, Stone Hearth had to close. It had been a community fixture for two and a half decades. "It makes you feel like a failure in a town you love," he says. "Friends reached out to me when I left Stone Hearth and said, 'Joe, are you done with Belmont?' I said, 'I'll never be done with Belmont.'"

Across the street, Il Casale had always been a generous neighbor. He knew the Belmont owners and they knew him; a kind of competitive brotherhood. Once, when a Stone Hearth carbon dioxide-producing machine ran out ("you just cannot run out of soda in a pizza place"), the Il Casale brothers donated a new tank.

And so, the geography:

On June 20, 2025, Stone Hearth Pizza closed.

On July 6, 2025, Joe flew to France to be with family.

Soon afterwards, the brothers offered him a management position.

On August 20, 2025, he went to work at The Wellington, where he is about six doors down from where he started, the shortest distance he has ever traveled.

Elissa Ely is a community psychiatrist.

Belmont Conservation Volunteers

Belmont Conservation Volunteers will resume their spring Saturday morning restoration work at Lone Tree Hill on Saturday, March 28.

Join the Belmont Conservation Volunteers Google Group at www.sustainablebelmont.net/belmont-conservation-volunteers/ for updates on how you can help protect our conservation land's native plant communities.

Read more about the volunteers' past activities in "[Belmont Conservation Volunteers Need Help](#)," BCF Newsletter, September 2025.

Environmental Stewards: Emily Norton, CRWA



PHOTO COURTESY OF EMILY NORTON

Emily Norton.

The Charles River Watershed Association (CRWA), founded in 1965, works to protect, restore, and enhance the Charles River and its surrounding communities. Through scientific monitoring, policy advocacy, and on-the-ground restoration, CRWA has helped transform the Charles from one of the nation's most polluted rivers into a model of urban river recovery and climate resilience.

The Belmont Citizens Forum spoke with Emily Norton, executive director of CRWA, about the organization's watershed-wide initiatives, its community and policy partnerships, and her vision for the future of the Charles River. This interview has been edited for length and clarity: read the complete version at BelmontCitizensForum.org.

BCF

The Charles River is often cited as a restoration success story. How would you describe the river's progress over the past several decades?

Norton

The cleanup of the Charles River is nothing short of extraordinary. For decades, the residents of greater Boston were told it couldn't be done, and the river would always be polluted. The naysayers were wrong. Humans can do amazing things when we put our minds to it. The Clean Water Act of 1972 provided legal leverage to stop the routine dumping of industrial wastes, slaughterhouse materials, trash, and sewage into the Charles. [According

to the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority (MWRA), they have spent over \$900M on the Charles River alone, reducing sewage discharges by nearly 90%.]

BCF

What ecological challenges remain, and where does CRWA see the greatest need for action today?

Norton

The Charles River faces challenges on several fronts:

- Stormwater from paved and impervious surfaces in our 35 cities and towns enters the river from storm drains, carrying with it all the pollutants on those impervious surfaces: oil, gasoline, pet waste, fertilizer, and leaves all go straight into the river, untreated. This causes the growth of invasive plants and cyanobacteria blooms.
- Sewage releases in the lower basin section of the river due to ancient, combined stormwater and sewer pipes that get overwhelmed during large rainstorms.
- Dams impeding fish passage and harming river ecology.
- Over-withdrawal of river water, especially during periods of drought.
- Streams and tributaries that have been culverted, diverted, and/or buried, harming river ecology.
- Growth of invasive species both within the river and on land (terrestrial).
- High chloride concentrations in tributaries and the mainstem from application of road salt in the winter.
- PFAS and other contaminants have been identified in the river.

BCF

Climate change brings new threats to the watershed—flooding, stormwater impacts, and urban heat. How is CRWA addressing resilience across the watershed?

Norton

Climate impacts are worse because of the changes humans have made to the natural world to create the built environment we all rely on for our modern lives. Now, instead of infiltrating into the ground

and recharging groundwater, rain goes down storm drains and into stormwater pipes that were not built for the volume and intensity of storms we are now experiencing. This causes localized flooding. Impervious surfaces such as roads, sidewalks, and roofs cause heat island effect, exacerbated by the lack of tree canopy in our more urban areas. Climate change is bringing more frequent drought, causing tributaries and streams to run dry in some cases.

CRWA works with our cities and towns to change the way they manage stormwater to more closely replicate nature, such as by installing "green stormwater infrastructure," which directs rainwater or snowmelt into the ground rather than into the stormwater system. We also encourage cities and towns to plant more trees and do more to protect their existing tree canopy.

BCF

CRWA is known for its scientific and data-driven work. How does your water quality and flow monitoring inform restoration priorities and policy decisions?

Norton

Once a month at 6 AM, over 80 volunteer monitors (VMMs) head out to 35 sites along the Charles River and two tributaries, the Muddy River (Boston/Brookline) and Stop River (Medfield), to sample for *E. coli* bacteria, record river conditions, and measure temperature and depth. We use these data to create an annual report card so the public can know how healthy various sections of the river are.

BCF

The Charles runs through some of the most urban and diverse neighborhoods in the state. How does CRWA work toward equitable access to the river and its green spaces?

Norton

CRWA has a long history of fighting for increased access to the Charles. As the river became cleaner, it became more desirable for private interests to try to keep the public out. We monitor development proposals and advocate for increased public access to any proposals along the river as appropriate. Making the lower basin clean enough for swimming is the most powerful thing we can do to increase access to the river. Imagine that even on the hottest

days of the summer, people of any income level will be able to cool off by jumping into the Charles River.

BCF

What are your top advocacy priorities today—locally, at the state level, or federally?

Norton

Locally: dam removals. Better climate resilience rules, especially around stormwater management and tree protection. Implementation of existing MS4 [Municipal Separate Storm Sewer System] permitting, strengthening of the MS4 permit in the future.

Regionally: a new Long Term Control Plan for combined sewer overflows (CSOs) that will lead to CSO elimination as soon as possible. EPA to finalize a new stormwater permit that will require large property owners to reduce stormwater pollution.

Statewide: regional governance solution to flooding. Drought legislation to enable the state to better mandate water conservation during times of drought. Passage of a bill requiring the elimination of all CSOs statewide by 2050. Banning of second-generation rodenticides that are killing raptors and other wildlife, and pets. Updating the bottle bill to reduce plastic pollution in our rivers.

CRWA has begun the public conversation about having a regional governance structure to address flooding, as many other states do, but it is in very early stages, and we need many more voices participating. Watershed groups are a logical actor to play that role.

BCF

Looking ahead 20 years, what is your vision for the Charles River and its watershed if today's restoration, advocacy, and community efforts succeed?

Norton

In 20 years, we will have reopened at least one, and ideally several, beaches in the lower basin of the Charles for swimming. Numerous dams will have been removed, both on the mainstem and tributaries. Local communities will have updated stormwater rules, and as a result, are experiencing much less flooding. They have also updated tree protection rules and, as a result, have a larger, healthier tree canopy—cooling the air, cleaning the air, mitigating flooding, and providing more habitat.

Belmont Creates Clean-Energy Corridor

Sustainable infrastructure has fiscal, environmental benefits

By Peter Dizikes

Belmont is entering a new era of local energy production. Today, renewable energy capacity is becoming a normal component of our public buildings and even the town's vehicle fleet because clean energy offers both fiscal savings and environmental benefits.

Consider the flurry of recent building activity on lower Concord Avenue. Over the past five years, the town opened the new Belmont Public Library, the Belmont Sports Complex, Home of the Skip Vigliolo Rink, and the Belmont Middle and High School, all heavily powered by renewable energy. Together, these structures are turning Concord Avenue into a clean-energy corridor.

The school's rooftop solar array produces operating savings of around \$174,000 per year. It also features a geothermal energy system with 83 wells providing heating and cooling, making the entire project fossil-fuel free. The sports complex and rink's solar array is initially projected to produce energy savings of at least \$70,000 per year. And the new library building's solar panels are expected to cover 30% to 40% of its energy needs.

Out of all this equipment, only the rink's solar array is visible from street level. But out of sight should not be out of mind. Renewable energy, on

municipal rooftops or below ground, is now saving Belmont hundreds of thousands of dollars annually.

But there's more: Belmont's school bus fleet is about to include electric vehicles for the first time.

In December, Belmont's School Committee voted to pursue a contract for electric buses with the firm Highland Electric Fleets. This contract is supported by a \$1.8 million grant from the Massachusetts Clean Energy Center, a state economic development agency. The grant gives Belmont the funding to add at least three electric buses to next year's fleet with a 10-year contract for those vehicles.

Like the Concord corridor building projects, the bus deal provides the town with both fiscal and environmental advantages — starting with the outside funding, making the vehicles available. The 10-year contract, as opposed to three years for a typical diesel-engine bus contract, provides more stability for the school district. Town Meeting voted in 2023 to support this longer contract for electric buses. The annual cost increases for the electric buses is expected to be near 3% — lower than average, according to the School Committee. That rate rise may also be more predictable than for fossil fuel buses, since the cost will not be linked to diesel fuel prices.

As a bonus, Highland Electric Fleets handles both installing charging infrastructure and site operations.

On the environmental side, replacing internal combustion-powered buses with electric vehicles is a clear win. And there may be very localized health benefits from reducing pollution exposure around schools. (See "[Helping Belmont Students Breathe Easier](#)," BCF Newsletter, September/October 2021.)

Such good news should not lead us to underestimate the long-term challenges of climate change. In 2009, Town Meeting in Belmont voted to reduce our fossil fuel emissions by 80% by the year 2050. That is a formidable task, requiring rooftop solar, geothermal heat pumps, electric vehicles, home weatherization, and other sustainable technologies.

Belmont's Energy Committee was created after the 2009 vote to help steer the town towards its goals. Our 11 members identify opportunities for renewable energy adoption in both public and private sectors. We provide information, data, ideas,

and network connections to our partners in the town government and to neighbors. Further, we have organized public programs such as Belmont Goes Solar and Belmont Drives Electric.

Belmont has made progress. According to an Energy Committee inventory, town emissions were down 14% between 2014 and 2021. In 2019, Town Meeting also adopted a roadmap outlining key steps for decarbonizing Belmont.

As of January 2026, the number of solar arrays on private homes in Belmont has reached 460, with a capacity of 2,690 kilowatts, an outgrowth of the long-running Belmont Goes Solar effort.

Placing solar on municipal buildings is crucial for reaching the decarbonization target. The middle and high school building has an 840-kilowatt array. For perspective, the equivalent capacity could power hundreds of homes, and when energy use at the high school and middle school occasionally falls below the energy generated by the solar panels, the excess feeds into the Belmont Light system. The rink solar array is 360 kilowatts, and the new library has a 100-kilowatt array. All told, the three buildings account for 31% of Belmont's solar capacity.

The new projects also show that flexibility in funding upfront capital costs is important. For the high school and middle school project and the library project, the solar installations came from the funds provided by debt exclusion votes in 2018 and 2022, respectively.

To pay for the solar array on the rink, in 2025, town administrator Patrice Garvin negotiated an agreement for Belmont Light, the Belmont Hill School, and Belmont Day School to fund the \$1 million installation. As such, the rink project represents a hat trick of benefits: zero initial capital costs for the town, a reduction in annual operating expenses, and clean energy production that helps the climate.

Meanwhile, the electric bus program is supported by a state grant, representing still another type of funding source Belmont is utilizing.

Once funded and installed, rooftop solar pays for itself and then some. In 2025, solar panels were roughly 60% cheaper than they had been in 2010, while converting sunlight into energy was about 40% more efficient. More power for less money is a good deal.

Looking ahead, the Belmont Energy Committee will continue to engage with town officials about additional sources of support for clean-energy capital projects. We're committed to identifying solutions that work in fiscal, operational, and environmental terms, and we continue to notify residents about clean-energy consumer options.

Sustainable energy solutions are cost-effective and part of the everyday process of meeting our town's needs. So, when you're visiting Belmont's new library, look out of the upstairs picture window. When you see the rink and school campus across the street, know that those structures, along with the one you're standing in, comprise our new clean-energy corridor. There is much more to be done, but Belmont is taking solid steps in its journey towards decarbonization.

Peter Dizikes serves on the Belmont Energy Committee and is a Precinct 1 Town Meeting member.



In Memoriam

Ken Stalberg, BCF's loyal, longtime Mailing Maestro, recently passed away after a long illness.

Ken will be missed, though we must believe that the gentle strains of his viola will continue to be heard.

If you missed it, find [Elyssa Ely's profile of Ken](#) in our January 2026 Newsletter.



EV bus charger stations, Beverly, MA.

ROGER WRUBEL

Juncos Are Winter's Dark-Eyed Favorites



© SHAWN P. CAREY

Juncos flit ostentatiously, as they forage from bush and tree for grubs and berries to the earth for mites and seeds. Readily identifiable even to green novices, juncos sport in grassy fields, evergreen copses, or *under* feeders. Stress the locative: juncos are inveterate ground-dwellers, both for feeding and nesting, say by logs or in crevices. Bird guru Wayne Petersen recalls one inventive pair nesting in ivy on a brick wall.

Coming at you, dark bodies contrast with snow-white tummies; going away, dark tails flash with white outer feathers. Most sparrows have pink legs, but juncos also have perky pink bills. And while most sparrow field notes list similar species, after Junco you'll find "none"! The *Massachusetts Breeding Bird Atlas* describes their song as a long trill, sweeter than a Chipping Sparrow's, drier than a Pine Warbler's; call notes vary with the message: *smack!* (scold note), *tit-tit-tit* (location), *tchet-tchet* or *bzzz*

(alarm).

Their jazzy name is Spanish for the wet-habitat reed family (*juncus*), even though juncos invariably head for dry terrain, like forest floors and weedy fields. No wonder the name goes with its dashing look. Its unique genus (*Junco hyemalis*) within the 50-strong *Emberizine* family—places Dark-eyed Juncos as cousins to *Melospiza* (Song and Swamp Sparrows), *Zonotrichia* (White-throated and White-crowned), and *Pipilo* (towhees).

Dark-eyed Juncos range throughout North America (even into Mexico) in at least six identi-



FRED BOUCHARD

By Fred Bouchard

Fresh snow is still banking up, the Pats showed up and got beat up in Santa Clara, Red Sox pitchers and catchers are catching up in palmy Fort Myers, and juncos—pecking millet and sunflower seed—are crowding up beneath my lilac-row feeder. Oh, uppy day!

Braving an unprecedented zero-Fahrenheit stretch, juncos are hot this winter. Favorite winter visitors, juncos gray forms sharp-etched on snow-powder—stand apart from the usual suspects: dun House Sparrows, streaky-brown Song Sparrows, gray titmice. Arriving in dark, brisk flocks in October—their numbers annually fluctuate upwards with severe forecasts—these “little black jobs” cheerfully stand in for southbound breeding sparrows. As they’re nattily attired in formal plumage, my wife Mary Ellen calls them “nuns in habits.” “Priests” might serve better, as the vast majority we see are dapper slate-gray males; females tend toward a lighter gray-brown and prefer to hen-party in balmy climes.

fiable populations, or races. In New England, we see the Slate-colored, the most widely distributed race. Sharp-eyed Northeast birders may rarely spot a stray from the West: a rusty-backed Oregon or Pink-sided Junco. Rarer races are Gray-headed (Rockies and Southwest US to Mexico), Red-backed (Arizona, New Mexico), and White-winged (breeds in Black Hills, winters in Colorado.) For a deep dive into junco-lore and taxonomy, find Rick Wright’s *Peterson’s Reference Guide to Sparrows of North America*.

Reverse snowbirds, juncos fade away come April, occasionally in large flocks. Where do they go? Not south, but north, toward Maine, Canada—and to the Berkshires!—to re-up with their returning girls that trickle up our way come the equinox. While a handful breed in Worcester County, hardly any do further East.

Fred Bouchard, a member of the BCF Newsletter Committee, is celebrating 50 years as an adult-onset birdwatcher. See more of Shawn Carey’s bird photos at www.migrationproductions.com.

Thank you to our contributors

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March/April 2026



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Find late-breaking information about the Belmont Center Overlay Project at bit.ly/BCF-Overlay-Extra