

# Town of Belmont Economic Development Committee (EDC)

Location: Hybrid meeting in Art Gallery, Homer Building 3<sup>rd</sup> floor and via Zoom

Wednesday February 7, 2024, 7:00 pm

## Attendees

In person: Paul Joy, Wendy Etkind, Armine Humphrey, Marie Warner

Virtual/via zoom: Erin Brown, Deran Muckjian, Jack Sy

Also in attendance: Chris Ryan, Elizabeth Dionne

Not in attendance: Renee Guo, Schuyler Wiggin

Meeting led by Committee Chair Paul Joy

Minutes taken by Wendy Etkind

**RECEIVED  
TOWN CLERK  
BELMONT, MA**

DATE: March 8, 2024  
TIME: 8:33 AM

## **1. Call to order at 7:07 pm.**

## **2. Approval of meeting minutes**

Wendy reviewed the meeting minutes from the January 23, 2024 meeting.

*Motion: approval of meeting minutes from the January 23 EDC meeting. Motion was approved by a vote of 7-0.*

## **3. Review: EDC Accomplishments 2023**

Paul is preparing to present the 2023 accomplishments to the Select Board; these are also provided for the town's records. He opened up a discussion to the committee, for all to recollect and brainstorm our contributions. He suggested organizing them by major category area within our charge, as was done last year.

The committee had a lengthy discussion with all members contributing. We reviewed areas of effort, and discussed achievements, ideas and contributions to the town over the year of 2023. Erin suggested organizing it by focus area rather than by charge, which is more aligned to our goals.

Erin brought up that one area that we haven't done as good a job on is identifying and pursuing grants that benefit economic development in the town. This shifted the discussion from accomplishments to opportunities for 2024.

Elizabeth Dionne recognized the many contributions of the committee to the town in 2023. She clarified the pause on grants being difficult to administer and now focus on budgets for the override. If there is the support of a department head, expressed by Chris Ryan, the Select Board and

Administrator Garvin would support it too. One of her priorities would be to bring on an Economic Development Coordinator; revisions to the zoning bylaws will help make that person more effective.

Paul summarized the discussion with next steps on the accomplishments document. He will compile his notes from tonight, share the document with members for feedback and additions, and we will have a discussion at our next meeting where he will be looking for final input.

#### **4. Working Session: Belmont EDC Goal Setting for 2024-2025**

Paul started the goal setting conversation asking the committee whether the vision that we established last year still applies. The vision is: “Belmont is a town that is welcoming to business and is a great place to work and live”. The committee agreed that this is still very relevant, and we will use it again for this year.

We then brainstormed opportunities for the EDC to tackle in 2024, which include:

- Find a way to hire an Economic Development Coordinator. There was unanimous agreement that this should be a top priority.
- Support both businesses that are already here and growth and development of new businesses.
- Focus on grants and bringing in alternative funds to support local business (this ties back to hiring an Economic Development Coordinator).
- Refresh our survey data to understand “leakage” (people leaving Belmont to shop in other towns) and what types of businesses residents want to see in our town.
- How do we become a draw for people living in other communities? What can we offer that those communities want? Once identified, then work with landlords in town to create choices for prospective businesses. This would entail surveying surrounding towns and not just ours.
- Promote “Buy Local” programs. We could partner with groups doing this, and it can also tie in with sustainability initiatives to be more impactful.
- Establish a Senior Parking pass program to use their Senior Parking pass from another town to get free Senior Parking in Belmont Center.
- Attract a medical services building – they pay property tax and draw lots of people into town who shop while they’re here for an appointment.
- Do Senior Days: provide a Senior shuttle and on those days, merchants offer a senior discount. It could also include pop-up events with fun things for them to do like Bingo or painting classes, utilizing the empty storefronts.
- Encourage business association growth – either expand the Belmont Center Business Association town-wide, or create one that focuses on other areas. This is an area that an Economic Development Coordinator would be the right person to take it on. Chris shared that the Mass Office of Business Development (MOBD) might offer seed money funding – worth a look. MAPC has data on what other towns are doing to grow their business.

Elizabeth Dionne is undertaking a couple of initiatives to incent landlords to become more business friendly and fill empty spaces more quickly, including:

- Follow Arlington’s lead to put art in empty storefronts.

- Discuss rent concessions.
- Stop the downward spiral of empty storefronts.
- Considering long term “nuclear options” (no details given).

She will be meeting this week with a Belmont Center landlord to get the discussion started.

She shared the goals that she asked of the Vision 21 Committee: look at town-owned properties to strategically sell for development, create a vacancy law, identify parcels of interest that the town might want to acquire. An area of concern is the expansion of the Belmont Day School. Paul and Taylor (EDC and VIC committee chairs) collaborate often to align the efforts of our two committees; Ms Dionne complemented both of our committee’s efforts to protect the fiscal state of the town.

## 5. **Chair Updates to the Committee (Spring Zoning, Belmont Center Business Association, Energy, others)**

Paul provided updates on several initiatives that he participated in since our last meeting.

**Spring Zoning:** The Planning Board has our hotel proposal on their agenda. It’s at the discussion and revision level now, they share our goal to bring this proposal to the Spring Town Meeting. They brought up some new areas to our proposal, including formula-based business restrictions and design guidelines. The question was asked whether these are included, is it still feasible to get them into the Town Meeting proposal in time for the spring meeting? Or do we advocate taking the approach where we get something on the books and build from there, get feedback along the way and revise. The proposal also went through Town Counsel which led to significant revisions. Chris has the draft language and shared where members and the public can find it – it’s on the planning board’s website and is posted for the upcoming public forum.

They are trying to move forward with parking bylaw reform that we tried to put to Town Meeting in the fall. There will be a lot of scrutiny about this proposed reform and it is very likely to get pushback from neighbors. Our group has support, but it may require a lot of work and communication to alleviate concerns and get ahead of objections. Elizabeth shared that the residents lobbying against changes to parking bylaws are very vocal but also very small and advised to not be distracted by the noise. She gave the example that the Benton Library opponents turned out to be about 25 very very vocal people, where there were 800-900 supporters. Chris shared that he has experience with this kind of reform and has learned the benefit of doing outreach and education to avoid mis-steps.

**Belmont Center Business Association (BCBA):** Paul, Roy Epstein (Select Board), Geoff Lubien (Chair Warrant Committee & SB candidate) met with the BCBA. Deran said this was the best-attended meeting that he’s seen in 15 years. They had a productive meeting where they allocated the outdoor spaces, and set clear start and end dates for the outdoor space. Paul mentioned parts of Boston have ended permits for outdoor dining; perhaps we could recruit restaurants from there to one of the empty restaurant spaces in town. Paul and Deran encouraged members to attend our networking event. They were both enthusiastic about how collaborative this meeting was.

**Energy:** Paul, Chris Ryan and Marty Bitner met with representatives from the energy service company Cogentrix based in NJ. They are doing a battery storage project in Springfield MA. This is a very exciting idea and seems like it should be something to consider for our town. They learned that this project is in a very long waiting period for the battery to be turned on due to state regulations. Despite local support, the project is taking much longer than they thought and could extend to 4-5 years. The wait is due to a state regulatory approval challenge; Paul sees this as contradictory to the goals in the state and in our town to become more sustainable. A wait should be on the scale of months, not years. Chris suggested that we could add bylaw language preemptively so that our town is ready when the state catches up with these regulations.

#### 6. **Communication Lead Update**

Erin's focus is on getting the word out to businesses for the March 12 networking event. She overviewed some organizations who plan to attend. Marie and Allison Link are reaching out to the co-presidents of the Garden Club about the wayfinding fundraising partnership; if it's positive, they'll be extended the opportunity to join on the 12<sup>th</sup>. Members of the club have expressed an interest in donating. Paul has followed up on business sponsorship methods on the signs, and invited the consulting firm to our networking event. Erin will send out an update of who is signed up so far and ask for help with outreach.

#### 7. **Committee Updates**

- **MBTA Community Advisories** – they will be hosting another public forum at Beech St Center, which will be similar to the one held last week. The previous one had 80-100 attendees; Paul called out how important public engagement is. They were considering five scenarios; have officially excluded two scenarios. The Planning Board voted to limit the scope to 1800 units. Members asked about whether an analysis is being done on the impact to schools, parking, infrastructure, town services. Paul said it hasn't gotten enough attention yet. Chris said Milton did a study and it showed it would be marginally favorable.
- **Community Path Committee** – the chair reached out to Paul and asked him to let members of the EDC know that they will be hosting a public forum on March 7, 7pm at the Beech Street Center, to discuss Phase 1 of the Community Path program.

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

Belmont Center:

- No updates this week.

Other districts:

- Art's Creamery is now open and initial feedback is that it's very good.
- Deran's dentist let him know that he needed to move a sign by 48 inches when he built a handicap ramp for his customers. He expressed a huge amount of frustration that approvals from the town for this small change took 8 months. Chris asked Deran to put his dentist

directly in touch with Chris. Chris said there are some things the town can do, and some things that Town Meeting needs to do. Chris is very hopeful that we can make our town more business-friendly, and reiterated that we need to have a permitting discussion around signs.

**9. Meeting Scheduling –SB presentation (possible Feb 26), March (week of Mar 4 and 18)**

Paul is waiting to hear from the Select Board on the date for the joint presentation and asked Elizabeth for help in getting confirmation of that date. The meeting will be in person, and he is requesting that we be early on the agenda. This will be our second February meeting. We confirmed March meetings on Tuesday March 5 and Wednesday March 20. Looking forward, we will target dates during the week of April 8 and week of April 22.

**10. Public comment**

No public comments.

**11. Adjourned at 9:05 pm.**