

EDC and VIC Recommendations to the Select Board

Abstract:

This document presents a set of strategic recommendations for zoning bylaw changes in Belmont, Massachusetts, with the aim of creating a more business-friendly environment. The recommendations focus on hotel and restaurants regulation, rationalizing sign ordinances, and modernizing overall business requirements. By aligning our regulations with contemporary practices, we aim to attract more commercial investment, streamline processes, and foster a vibrant business community in Belmont.

Introduction:

Belmont, Massachusetts, is a thriving community with a rich history and promising future. Yet, to maintain this trajectory, we must constantly reassess our regulations and policies to ensure they align with current needs and future aspirations—especially in light of our current fiscal challenges and projected fiscal deficits beginning in FY25. This document represents a concerted effort by the Economic Development Committee (EDC) and the Vision 21 Implementation Committee (VIC) to do just that. Our focus here is on Belmont's zoning bylaws - the cornerstone of our local business environment.

For our town to flourish, we must foster a dynamic and supportive commercial environment. The zoning bylaws have a critical role in this, influencing everything from the types of businesses that operate in our town, their operations, and even their signage. However, certain aspects of these bylaws have become outdated, failing to reflect contemporary business practices and hindering our competitiveness. To address these issues, we present a set of strategic recommendations aimed at streamlining processes, modernizing regulations, and fostering a more business-friendly environment.

Hotel and Lodging for Belmont Recommendations:

1. Create hotel definitions for Hotel, Hotel – Boutique, and Hotel – Bed & Breakfast
2. Allow Hotels – Boutique and Bed and Breakfast hotels by-right in all business districts, Hotels in General Business, South Pleasant St. Overlay, McLean R&D Overlay District, and Local Business I districts (by special permit).

Definitions:

Hotel: A hotel is an establishment that provides paid lodging on a short-term basis, with a room count exceeding 75 rooms. In addition to lodging, these establishments typically offer additional services such as restaurants, meeting rooms, entertainment, and recreational facilities. These are larger facilities, often part of regional or national chains, that can accommodate a high volume of guests. They contribute significantly to the local economy through the provision of jobs and by attracting a steady flow of visitors who patronize local businesses.

Local Examples:

- Charles Hotel – 14 University Rd, Cambridge MA
 1. Rooms: 294

2. Lot Size: 2.75 Acres
 3. Floor Area: 380,024 sqft
 4. Estimated Assessed Value: \$267 Million
 5. \$/SQFT = \$702.59
- Residence Inn by Marriott – Watertown
 1. Rooms: 148
 2. Lot Size: 1.54 Acres
 3. Floor Area: 110,448 sqft
 4. Estimated Assessed Value: \$37.5 Million
 5. \$/SQFT = \$339.53
 - Freepoint Hotel Cambridge
 1. Rooms: 121
 2. Lot Size: 1.35 Acres
 3. Floor Area: 58,618 sqft
 4. Estimated Assessed Value: \$20.5 Million
 5. \$/SQFT = \$349.72
 - AC Hotel by Marriott – Cambridge
 1. Rooms: 150
 2. Lot Size: 1.09 Acres
 3. Floor Area: 84,930 sqft
 4. Estimated Assessed Value: \$23.1 Million
 5. \$/SQFT = \$271.99
 - Sheraton Commander – Cambridge
 1. Rooms: 175
 2. Lot Size: 0.79 Acres
 3. Floor Area: 111,920 sqft
 4. Estimated Assessed Value: \$12.6 Million
 5. \$/SQFT = \$112.58

Hotel – Boutique: A Boutique Hotel is a smaller establishment, with a room count of up to 75 rooms, typically located in a fashionable urban or suburban setting. These hotels differentiate themselves from larger chain/branded hotels and motels by providing personalized accommodation and services. They often feature unique, upscale accommodations and emphasize their connection to the local community. The limited number of rooms allows for more personalized service, often resulting in a more intimate guest experience.

Local Examples:

- Hotel Veritas – Cambridge
 1. Rooms: 31
 2. Lot Size: 0.15 Acres

3. Floor Area: 12,094 sqft
 4. Estimated Assessed Value: \$9,990,540
 5. \$/SQFT = \$826
- Sonder 907 Main – Cambridge
 1. Rooms: 67
 2. Lot Size: 0.22 Acres
 3. Floor Area: 41,249 sqft
 4. Estimated Assessed Value: \$10,015,600
 5. \$/SQFT = \$242.81
 - The Inn at Hastings Park – Lexington
 1. Rooms: 22
 2. Lot Size: 2.25 Acres
 3. Floor Area: 14,625+1920+5040 = 21,585
 4. Estimated Assessed Value: \$3,127,000
 5. \$/SQFT = \$144.87
 - Concord's Colonial Inn – Concord
 1. Rooms: 54
 2. Lot Size: 0.92 Acres
 3. Floor Area: 33,664 sqft
 4. Estimated Assessed Value: \$6,024,400
 5. \$/SQFT = \$178.96

Hotel – Bed & Breakfast: A Bed & Breakfast Hotel is a small establishment that offers overnight accommodation and breakfast, with a room count of up to 8 rooms. These hotels are typically private residences or small buildings converted for accommodation and are characterized by a highly personalized service and unique, homely atmosphere. They provide a cozy, intimate alternative to standard hotels and often focus on individualized experiences. Their small size enables them to fit into a variety of areas without drastically altering the overall character.

Local Examples:

- North Bridge Inn – Concord
 1. Rooms: 6
 2. Lot Size: 0.24 Acres
 3. Floor Area: 6,729 SQFT
 4. Estimated Assessed Value: \$1,756,900
 5. \$/SQFT = \$261.09
- Morrison House Bed and Breakfast – Somerville
 1. Rooms: 6
 2. Lot Size: 0.18 Acres
 3. Floor Area: 3,504
 4. Estimated Assessed Value: \$1,973,400

5. \$/SQFT = \$563.18

- Prospect Place Bed & Breakfast – Cambridge
 1. Rooms: 3
 2. Lot Size: 0.12 Acres
 3. Floor Area: 3,266 sqft
 4. Estimated Assessed Value: \$1,940,900
 5. \$/SQFT = \$594.27

Rationale:

General Rationale for Enhancing Lodging Opportunities

The need for enhancing lodging opportunities in Belmont is primarily driven by its strategic location. This provides the town with a unique advantage to serve a consistent influx of tourists, travelers, and visitors to McLean Hospital who prefer to stay within the proximity of Belmont.

Hotels provide a source of consistent income for the town. They are subject to property, meals, and room occupancy taxes, often referred to as being "triple taxed." This not only augments the town's revenue but also aids in offsetting residential tax burdens without placing additional demands on town services like schools.

Besides, hotels can invigorate the local economy. They bring in foot traffic, which supports other local businesses, particularly restaurants, retail stores, and entertainment venues. Therefore, expanding lodging opportunities aligns with the goal of enhancing Belmont's economic vitality.

Rationale for #1: Create Hotel Definitions

Creating clear definitions for "Hotel," "Hotel - Boutique," and "Hotel - Bed & Breakfast" is paramount for the effective zoning and regulation of these establishments. These definitions will set the parameters for the type and scale of hotels that can be developed in various zones, thereby helping to maintain the unique character of different areas in Belmont. The differentiation will also ensure that potential developers are aware of the expectations and requirements specific to each category, aiding in more streamlined, transparent planning and development processes.

Rationale for #2: By-right Hotels in Specific Districts

Permitting boutique and bed & breakfast hotels by-right in all business districts and allowing larger hotels in specific districts, such as General Business, South Pleasant St. Overlay, McLean R&D Subdistrict, and Cushing Square Overlay and Local Business I districts (by special permit), can encourage appropriate economic development while preserving neighborhood character. Boutique hotels, due to their smaller scale, can be easily incorporated into various settings without disrupting their aesthetic appeal.

Larger hotels can rejuvenate underutilized lots in selected districts, triggering further development and economic activities in these areas. Given their size and potential amenities, these hotels can become landmarks or cornerstone establishments, attracting visitors and supporting local businesses.

Restaurant Recommendations:

1. All restaurants allowed by-right in all business districts
2. Consolidate restaurant definitions to: Sit down or Full Service, Quick Service – Local; Quick Service – Chain
3. Remove or relax minimum parking requirements
4. Create grease trap code

Definitions

- **Sit Down or Full Service Restaurant:** An establishment where meals are served primarily to customers seated at tables or booths. It includes waiter/waitress service, where customers place orders while seated and the food is brought to them. The establishment has kitchen facilities where food is prepared on the premises. It typically offers a wide variety of cuisines and may include specialty restaurants, diners, and bistros. These establishments typically have more than 50 indoor seats.
- **Quick Service Restaurant - Local:** A restaurant that provides food and beverages in a relatively short waiting time. The category includes fast-casual dining establishments and those with limited-service, where customers typically order and pick up their food at a counter. This category may encompass establishments such as sandwich shops, coffee shops, salad bars, and local pizzerias. The distinguishing factor is that these establishments are local, defined as having fewer than 20 locations within a 100-mile radius. These establishments typically have 50 or fewer indoor seats.
- **Quick Service Restaurant - Chain:** A quick service restaurant (as defined above) that belongs to a larger chain, characterized by standardized features such as menus, ingredients, and decor. The defining characteristic is that these restaurants have 20 or more locations within a 100-mile radius, indicative of a larger corporate or franchising structure. These establishments typically have 50 or fewer indoor seats.

Preserving Local Charm: These definitions aim to not only accurately describe the various types of restaurant establishments that could operate in Belmont, but also to encourage a diverse blend of eateries that add to the local character of Belmont.

Recommendation 1: All restaurants allowed by-right in all business districts

Rationale:

- **Evidence of Success:** Belmont already hosts restaurants in every business district, demonstrating their viability and the community's acceptance of these establishments. A by-right approval will streamline the development process for more such businesses.
- **Efficiency:** This approach saves the Planning Board and the Office of Community Development valuable time and resources by reducing the number of cases that require detailed review.
- **Economic Impact:** Making the process easier and less costly for business owners encourages entrepreneurship, potentially leading to a more vibrant and diverse restaurant scene in Belmont.

Recommendation 2: Consolidate restaurant definitions to: Sit down or Full Service, Quick Service – Local; Quick Service – Chain

Rationale:

- **Clarity and Precision:** The current definitions are vague, overlapping, and impose restrictions that do not necessarily benefit the town. By refining these definitions, we ensure that regulatory language aligns with the realities of the restaurant industry.
- **Regulatory Focus:** The new definitions allow the town to regulate restaurants based on what we value as a community, such as a healthy balance between local and chain establishments.
- **Efficiency:** Streamlining definitions reduces unnecessary bureaucracy, saving time and resources for both the Planning Board and business owners.

Recommendation 3: Remove or relax minimum restaurant parking requirements

Rationale for Relaxing or Eliminating Minimum Restaurant Parking Requirements:

The proposal to either relax or eliminate the minimum parking requirements for restaurants is a progressive step towards modernizing Belmont's zoning bylaws, and it ensures our town's competitiveness while considering the unique circumstances of our community. This decision was informed by several factors:

- **Promoting Commercial Competitiveness:** Rigorous parking regulations can create unnecessary barriers for new and existing restaurants due to the cost, space, and logistical challenges associated with providing sufficient parking spaces. By relaxing or possibly eliminating these requirements, Belmont can become a more appealing location for restaurant establishments, fostering a diverse and vibrant dining scene.
- **Aligning with Contemporary Trends:** Society's transportation habits are changing with increasing use of public transportation, biking, walking, and ride-share services. Our regulations need to adapt to these trends. Providing flexibility on parking requirements allows us to adjust to these evolving behaviors and needs.
- **Encouraging Adaptive Reuse:** Older, character-filled buildings that may not have been initially designed with modern parking needs in mind are often perfect for restaurants but may struggle to meet stringent parking requirements. By offering the possibility to relax or eliminate these requirements, we can encourage the adaptive reuse of these buildings, thus preserving Belmont's unique character while promoting economic vitality.
- **Responding to Local Conditions:** The choice to relax or eliminate parking requirements allows us to consider the specific circumstances of different areas within Belmont. Some neighborhoods might have adequate public or shared parking facilities, or have suitable alternative transportation options that could warrant the elimination of parking requirements, while others might need a relaxation of standards.
- **Maintaining Flexibility:** The proposal is designed to maintain flexibility, enabling the Planning Board and Zoning Board of Appeals to consider the unique conditions of each application and make decisions that balance the needs of economic development with community impact.

Through this proposed change, the Economic Development Committee and Vision 21 Implementation Committee aim to strike a balance between fostering a robust, diverse, and accessible dining scene in Belmont and ensuring the practical needs of the town's residents and businesses are met.

Recommendation 4: Create grease trap code

Rationale:

- **Standardization:** Best practice designs for grease trap systems exist and should be codified in the zoning by-law to avoid case-by-case disputes.
- **Efficiency:** Having a standardized grease trap code will streamline the approval process, saving time for the Planning Board, Office of Community Development, and business owners.
- **Environmental Impact:** Implementing a comprehensive grease trap code will help to protect Belmont's sewer system and the environment from harmful grease blockages.

Expanded Grease Management Change Rationale:

1. Limited Effectiveness of Current Outdoor Grease Traps:

Belmont's current regulations rely heavily on outdoor grease interceptors. While these devices can be effective, they have certain limitations. For one, outdoor interceptors are often sized based on the building's plumbing system rather than the volume of grease a restaurant produces, which can lead to under or over-sizing. Under-sized traps may not adequately prevent grease from entering the sewer system, while over-sized traps are unnecessarily costly and space-consuming.

Moreover, outdoor grease traps require regular maintenance and cleaning to remain effective, but their out-of-sight location can lead to neglect. Finally, in colder climates, outdoor grease traps can freeze, impairing their effectiveness and potentially leading to costly repairs.

2. The Case for Hydromechanical Interceptors:

Hydromechanical grease interceptors (HGI) offer a modern solution to these issues. They are installed indoors, making them easier to monitor, maintain, and protect from weather conditions. But the primary advantage of HGIs is that they can be sized based on the actual volume of grease a restaurant produces, resulting in more effective grease management.

This is achieved by using a combination of flow rate and grease production sizing. The flow rate is determined by the type and volume of fixtures connected to the interceptor, while the grease production sizing is calculated based on the restaurant's menu and number of meals served per day. This data-driven approach ensures that the grease interceptor is neither under nor over-sized, optimizing both effectiveness and cost.

3. Update to Belmont's Regulations:

Belmont's current regulations could be enhanced by incorporating these modern approaches to grease management. Adopting the use of HGIs and calculating their size based on flow rate and grease production would result in more effective, efficient, and restaurant-specific grease management. This approach would reduce the risk of grease-related sewer blockages, which are costly to remedy and pose significant environmental risks. At the same time, it would ensure that restaurants are not burdened with unnecessarily large and costly grease management systems.

Sign Recommendations: Conforming signs allowed by right; non-conforming signs allowed with a special permit

Rationales:

1. Alignment with Existing Zoning Bylaw Structure:

By allowing conforming signs by right and non-conforming signs through a special permit, this recommendation brings signage regulations in line with the established structure of the zoning bylaw. This promotes consistency and predictability in the regulatory framework, facilitating easier compliance by business owners and clearer enforcement by the town.

2. Preservation of 2017 Sign Law Principles:

The principles underpinning the 2017 sign law, which were designed to control clutter, ensure safety, and preserve the aesthetic character of the town, remain intact under this recommendation. This ensures that while we adapt our regulations to become more business-friendly, we are still mindful of the broader goals of our town's planning and zoning efforts.

3. Efficiency for Planning Board and Office of Community Development (OCD):

Currently, the Planning Board and OCD invest significant time in processing and approving individual sign applications. By allowing conforming signs by right, we reduce the caseload, allowing the Planning Board and OCD to allocate their time and resources to more complex and critical planning issues.

4. Cost and Time Savings for Business Owners:

The existing process can be time-consuming and costly for business owners, especially for those operating small and medium-sized businesses. Simplifying the process and reducing the need for special permits will make it easier and quicker for businesses to get their signs approved and installed, promoting a vibrant and dynamic commercial environment in Belmont.

General Business Recommendations

Recommendations:

1. Permits convey with property under a certain time frame/ are grandfathered –
2. OCD (Office of Community Development) must respond to application requests within 4 weeks

Rationale for Recommendation 1:

- Streamlining Processes: The current law often requires a new business to reapply for permits even if its business model closely resembles that of the previous occupant. This results in repetitive work for the Planning Board and Office of Community Development.
- Cost and Time Savings: By allowing permits to convey with a property or be grandfathered under certain circumstances, we can save business owners significant time and money.

Rationale for Recommendation 2:

- **Certainty for Business Owners:** Requiring the OCD to respond to application requests within 4 weeks provides business owners with a predictable timeline, allowing them to plan accordingly.
- **Investment in Modern Systems:** This recommendation encourages the OCD to invest in new permit and application software. Modern systems offer improved visibility of the application process and provide valuable insights for both the applicants and those processing the application. These upgrades would reduce the OCD's reliance on outdated systems and bring Belmont's processes in line with best practices in municipal governance.
- **Increased Efficiency:** By speeding up the overall permitting process, we can save business owners time and money, contributing to a more business-friendly environment in Belmont.

June 28th Meeting

General Overview of the June 28th, 2023 Joint Meeting of the Economic Development Committee and Vision 21 Implementation Committee

On June 28th, 2023, the Economic Development Committee (EDC) and the Vision 21 Implementation Committee (VIC) held a joint meeting to discuss and vote on several key matters concerning lodging, restaurants, signage, and general business practices in Belmont. The meeting was attended by Select Board Member Elizabeth Dionne and the following committee members:

Economic Development Committee:

- Erin Brown, Wendy Etkind, Renee Guo, Deran Muckjian, Jack Sy, Katherine Venzke, Marie Warner, Paul Joy (Chair)

Vision 21 Implementation Committee:

- Aaron Pikilingis, Gang Zhao, Amy Kirsch, Max Colice, Dan Berry, Michael Klug, Brian Antonellis, Christine Arthur, and Taylor Yates (Chair)

Through a series of unanimous votes, the committees endorsed a set of motions aimed at modernizing and streamlining business regulations in the town, improving Belmont's attractiveness to commercial investors, and enhancing the diversity and quality of services available to residents.

Lodging/Hotels:

The committees adopted a motion to refine definitions for Hotel and Hotel – Boutique/B&B, and to permit Hotels – Boutique/B&B by-right in all business districts, and larger Hotels in specified districts. This action aims to foster economic development, broaden lodging options, and maintain the distinctive character of Belmont. The vote was unanimous, with 17 members in favor.

Restaurants:

The committees voted to endorse recommendations for restaurants, which include streamlining definitions; permitting restaurants in all business districts; providing flexibility for eliminating or relaxing

minimum parking requirements; and implementing a grease trap code and allowing outdoor seating by right on the restaurants property. These changes aim to simplify approval processes, diversify the local economy, enhance dining options, and uphold environmental standards. The vote was again unanimous, with 17 members in favor.

Signage:

The committees voted in favor of recommendations regarding signage, allowing conforming signs by right and non-conforming signs with a special permit. These changes align signage regulations with the existing zoning bylaw, uphold the principles of the 2017 sign law, and enhance efficiency for the Planning Board, Office of Community Development, and local business owners. The vote was unanimous, with 17 members in favor.

General Business:

The committees endorsed recommendations concerning general business practices. These include permitting conveyance of permits with properties under certain time frames and obligating the Office of Community Development to respond to application requests within 30 days. The aim is to bolster Belmont's competitive edge, encourage investment, expedite processes, and modernize the town's systems. The motion was adopted with 16 members in favor.

In a final vote, the EDC and VIC endorsed all the recommendations presented concerning lodging, restaurants, signage, and general business. This unanimous endorsement reflects the committees' commitment to improving Belmont's business environment, stimulating economic growth, and aligning the town's policies with contemporary practices. The motion was adopted with 16 members in favor.

Conclusion:

In conclusion, the recommendations outlined in this document and the endorsement of these recommendations by the Economic Development Committee and the Vision 21 Implementation Committee provide a blueprint for modernizing Belmont's zoning bylaws to better support our local businesses. By refining restaurant definitions, we enable more precise regulation. By updating our grease management regulations, we ensure environmental sustainability. By rationalizing our sign ordinances, we balance aesthetics with practicality. Finally, by modernizing our general business practice requirements, we remove unnecessary barriers to commercial investment.

The Economic Development Committee and Vision 21 Implementation Committee strongly believe that implementing these changes will make Belmont an even more vibrant, attractive, and competitive community. However, these recommendations represent only the first step. Ongoing dialogue with our community, regular reassessments, and continuous refinement of our policies are key to our town's lasting prosperity. We look forward to working collaboratively with the wider community as we continue to make Belmont a great place to live, work, and do business.

Final Motions Approved by EDC and VIC

Lodging/Hotels Adopted Motion:

"I move that the Economic Development Committee and the Vision 21 Implementation Committee endorse the recommendations concerning lodging. These recommendations include creating precise definitions for Hotel and Hotel – Boutique/B&B; permitting Hotels – Boutique/B&B by-right in all business districts, and larger Hotels in specified districts. These actions are rooted in our commitment to facilitating suitable economic development, increasing lodging diversity, and preserving our town's character."

Adopted: 17 Yes, 0 No

Restaurants Adopted Motion:

"I move that the Economic Development Committee and the Vision 21 Implementation Committee endorse the recommendations regarding restaurants. These include streamlining restaurant definitions; permitting Restaurants all business districts; eliminating or relaxing minimum parking requirements; and implementing a grease trap code and allowing outdoor seating by right on the restaurants property. Our aim is to simplify the approval process for restaurants, support a varied local economy, improve dining options, and uphold environmental standards through improved grease management."

Adopted 17 Yes, 0 No

Signs Adopted Motion:

"I move that the Economic Development Committee and the Vision 21 Implementation Committee endorse the recommendations pertaining to signage. This includes allowing conforming signs by right and non-conforming signs with a special permit. This change aligns our signage regulations with the overarching zoning bylaw, upholds the principles of the 2017 sign law, and improves efficiency for the Planning Board, Office of Community Development, and business owners."

Adopted 17 Yes, 0 No

General Business Adopted Motion:

"I move that the Economic Development Committee and the Vision 21 Implementation Committee endorse the general business recommendations. These include, permitting conveyance of permits with properties under certain time frames, and obligating the Office of Community Development to respond to application requests within 30 days. Our intention is to bolster Belmont's competitive edge, encourage investment, expedite processes, and bring our systems up-to-date."

Adopted 16 Yes, 0 No

Final Adopted Motion

"I move that the Economic Development Committee and the Vision 21 Implementation Committee endorse all the recommendations presented today concerning lodging, restaurants, signage, and general business. Our unified endorsement reflects our commitment to improving our town's business environment, stimulating economic growth, and aligning our policies with modern practices."

Adopted 16 Yes, 0 No