

**Town of Belmont Joint Meeting of the Economic Development Committee (EDC) and Vision 21
Implementation Committee (VIC)**

Location: Hybrid meeting via Zoom

Wednesday June 28, 2023, 7:00 pm

**RECEIVED
TOWN CLERK
BELMONT, MA**

DATE: August 23, 2023

TIME: 2:33 PM

Economic Development Committee:

In attendance: Paul Joy, Erin Brown, Wendy Etkind, Renee Guo, Deran Muckjian, Jack Sy, Katherine Venzke, Marie Warner.

Not in attendance: Emma Thurston

Vision 21 Implementation Committee:

In attendance: Taylor Yates, Brian Antonellis, Christine Arthur, Dan Barry, Max Colice, Amy Kirsch, Michael Klug, Aaron Pikcilingis, Gang Zhao.

Amy Kirsch left a little early and was not in attendance to vote on the motions after Signage.

Also in attendance: Elizabeth Dionne, Gabriel Distler

Co-Led by P Joy and T Yates

Minutes taken by W Etkind

1. Call to order at 7:05 pm.

2. Zoning Bylaw Joint Discussion

Paul Joy and Taylor Yates kicked off the meeting overviewing the core issues that we are here to discuss. These are evaluating bylaws affecting hotels, restaurants, signage and parking/ general business. During this meeting, we'll go through the initial recommendation, vote on each of the four key areas and then do a final vote. Our recommendations may or may not get implemented, but this step is important to move them forward in the process towards a final vote by Town Meeting.

Elizabeth Dionne stepped in to give context from her perspective on the Select Board for this effort. She wants us to get something done on this important initiative to make Belmont more business-friendly, and this is an important first step to ensure this is not a town where good ideas go to die. Belmont has a reputation of being hard to open a business. She heard how hard it is to open a restaurant and we all want to change that. As they exist, our bylaws are Frankenstein-like, where things got added on based on initiatives over the years, and now the bylaws are complex, interconnected, hard to interpret, and time-consuming by town staff to try and disentangle them. It's too hard to rewrite the zoning bylaws in a timeframe that can make any positive change, so this is where we need to start.

Currently, our tax mix is 95% from residents and only 5% from business. Elizabeth was speaking with somebody from the City of Newton whose mix is 85%/ 15% which they think is bad and want to move it more towards taxes generated from businesses. Elizabeth wants to set a goal for Belmont of 85%/15%.

The Select Board tasked VIC to do this work, which is mission critical for Belmont's future, and it was a natural tie-in with the EDC's work.

The key goals of this effort tonight:

- Create initial recommendations that are clear, visible, easy wins that will ultimately go to Town Meeting in the Fall. We don't have to come up with language, they have a consultant who will help.
- These votes will send a powerful signal to business that our town is making an effort to become more business friendly.
- Put the recommendations in front of the Select Board for a vote on July 10.

Once the Select Board votes, there will be an effort to get the members of Town Meeting comfortable with an overall zoning bylaw re-write, as an open and comprehensible process. There should be no surprises for Town Meeting members when it comes to a vote in the fall, for success we should bring them along through the process.

Taylor started presenting slides that he co-developed with Paul, with initial drafts of recommendations to move forward to the Select Board. The slides are posted on the EDC's town web site and contain the recommendations referenced in each of the below motions.

a. Hotel Recommendations and possible vote

The committees reviewed 3 areas to consider: Definitions of hotels, whether to allow hotels by type, parking regulations

We discussed that since no bylaws for hotels exist (other than a reference in the parking regulations), the committee doesn't have to be cautious; we're creating a basic structure. Our role is to make it concrete and give examples of what we're recommending so that the consultant can draft the appropriate language. We agreed to make the recommendations as simple as possible.

The committees held a lengthy discussion around hotels, including:

- defining the type by services and square footage
- placing a cap on the number of rooms
- using existing overlays of the business districts and treating all of them the same way, and adding South Pleasant Street and McLean Hospital (there are some vacant buildings on those premises that could be candidates)
- Tabling AirBnB

Motion: Motion 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.

The motion was unanimously approved:

- ***VIC: All AYE (9-0)***
- ***EDC: All AYE (8-0)***

b. Restaurant Recommendations and possible vote

Taylor and Paul overviewed the four areas to reform: Districts, Definitions, Parking, and Grease trap code. Elizabeth recommended adding a 5th area, outdoor seating, and the committees agreed.

The committees moved quickly through all of the topics with the exception of parking. The committees want to simplify the definitions by district as they are very complex and often contradictory/ overlap/ are inconsistent.

Parking merited a longer discussion. Of note:

- Paul presented research that he did of Belmont’s restaurant parking regulations per table compared to other towns, and that Belmont requires twice as much parking as our neighbors.
- No restaurants have been denied a special permit based on parking in 20 years; they have to go through a rigorous and frustrating process that has consistently ended up with the same result.
- Even if you require parking, where does it go when there is fixed space?
- It’s an antiquated requirement – it’s more sustainable to have restaurants in urban centers rather than spreading them out; contradicts our town’s long term goals.

There was discussion about relaxing vs. eliminating parking restrictions, which had mixed support on both sides of the issue.

We discussed how to get any recommendations successfully through Town Meeting: advocate which approach and reasons why. Frame this as a pilot to move things in the right direction. It was suggested to present options and let them vote on which one, to get something done.

We took a straw poll to eliminate parking requirements: 10 were in favor, 6 were opposed. The proposal was made and accepted to submit the motion with language recommending to “reduce and/ or eliminate parking”

Motion: Motion 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.

The motion was unanimously approved:

- **VIC: All AYE (9-0)**
- **EDC: All AYE (8-0)**

c. Sign Recommendations and possible vote

The committees discussed the process for approval of signage today; approvals are needed any time a sign is needed.

The recommendation discussed is to reform the regulations to clearly define conforming and non-conforming signs, and allow conforming signs to bypass an approval process. We also discussed that these would apply to new signs and to replacing or restoring an existing sign.

Motion: Motion 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."

The motion was unanimously approved:

- **VIC: All AYE (9-0)**
- **EDC: All AYE (8-0)**

d. General Business Recommendations and possible vote

The committees held a discussion around several general business areas including "grandfathering" or conveyance of permits in order to expedite approvals when the prior business owner had already gone through that same process. With the ability to leverage previous permitting, the Office of Community development should be able to process the requests much more efficiently and we recommend a time cap to go along with this change.

There was a brief discussion around online automation of permitting which is a more sustainable process and would alleviate pressure on the town staff. This is seeding the idea for a future discussion.

Motion: Motion 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."

The motion was unanimously approved:

- ***VIC: All AYE (8-0)***
- ***EDC: All AYE (8-0)***

3. EDC and VIC Overall Recommendations and Vote

Motion: Motion 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.

The motion was unanimously approved:

- ***VIC: All AYE (8-0)***
- ***EDC: All AYE (8-0)***

4. Zoning Bylaw Next Steps

Paul and Taylor laid out the next steps following tonight's recommendations and votes. They will send out the approved language to town administration, select board and secretary. Along with the language, they will include the rationale behind the recommendations. Elizabeth will work with Patrice to start looking for a consultant who will draft the recommendations into language appropriate for updated bylaws.

Elizabeth thanked both committees for this historic first step, that we are on a path for positive change, and called out how huge of a difference implementing these reforms will make.

5. Member Recruitment Update (EDC)

Paul gave a brief update on EDC Member recruitment. Positions have been offered to Schuyler Wiggin and Armine Humphrey by the Select Board, and they will be able to join our meetings after being sworn in.

6. Member Appreciation (EDC)

Paul wanted to recognize and appreciate two long-term members who will not be renewing their terms this month.

First, he recognized his co-chair Katherine Venzke. Paul described how much he's learned from her, and all they've accomplished together. He spoke for all of the members to let her know that we will

miss having her as a member of this committee. Gabe offered additional thanks as staff liaison and recognized her great contributions as a Business Study member, EDC founding member, EDC co-chair, and also all that she did to help Gabe get up to speed when he first came in to his position on the town staff.

He also echoed the many contributions from Emma Thurston, former chair, for all of the work she did to help him come up to speed during the height of the pandemic. Emma was not in attendance for the committee to thank in person, but we all wanted to recognize her many contributions as well. Like Katherine, she was on the Business Study, was a founding EDC member, and for several years she was the EDC Chair.

Thank you both for your great commitment to the Economic Development Committee and to the Town of Belmont!

7. Public Comment

Town Meeting Member Angus Abercrombie spoke to say THANK YOU to everyone in the room. He called out that we are in a dire financial state in this town. What was accomplished tonight are important first steps to a better future, and he is excited to work on next steps and expanding these proposals and tying them in with other initiatives including reforming parking and increasing density. He's also excited to use these initiatives as a way to make the town more sustainable, to evolve from needing a car to go anywhere to a town with more transportation freedom and choices.

8. Approval of Meeting Minutes (VIC June 21, EDC June 1, June 15)

The VIC voted on approval of the meeting minutes from the June 21, 2023 meeting.

Motion: approval of meeting minutes from the June 21 VIC meeting. Motion was approved by a vote of 8-0.

The EDC voted on approval of the meeting minutes from the June 1, 2023 meeting.

Motion: approval of meeting minutes from the June 1 EDC meeting. Motion was approved by a vote of 5-0 (Wendy, Deran and Renee abstained).

9. Upcoming Meetings

EDC: July 26, August TBA

VIC: TBA

10. Adjourned at 9:15pm.