

**APPROVED BY
THE SELECT BOARD**

3/29/2021

SELECT BOARD SPECIAL MEETING

MONDAY, MARCH 8, 2021

REMOTE MEETING

7:00 PM

**RECEIVED
TOWN CLERK
BELMONT, MA**

DATE: April 5, 2021

TIME: 2:57 PM

A meeting of the Select Board was called to order at 7:00 pm by Chair Roy Epstein. Vice Chair Tom Caputo, and Select Board member Adam Dash. Town Administrator Patrice Garvin, Director of Community Development Glenn Clancy, Director of DPW Jay Marcotte and Chief of Police James MacIsaac were also present.

Public Input Session - Proposed One Lane Restriction on Leonard Street – April through October, 2021

- Epstein said that the purpose of this meeting is informational. It's an opportunity for the public to ask questions about the proposed plan. We are joined by Glenn Clancy, Director of Community Development.

[The Chair asked that questions and comments be confined to three minutes.]

- Glenn Clancy presented a sketch that indicated the proposed flow of traffic. He reported that it is the same configuration as last summer. Traffic will again be controlled through the use of jersey barriers. He said that the one-way flow of traffic worked out well last year. The plan is aimed at accommodating restaurants. This configuration allowed us to protect parking places and allowed for patrons of non-restaurant businesses to get to their businesses easily.
- Gates can be removed between Alexander St. and Victoria Taqueria for parking or delivery trucks. But once you come to CVS, the gates will not be movable. The barriers will be in place on both sides of street. On the south side and Wellington side of Leonard they will be solid and, on the Taqueria side, they will be movable. The 8 or 10 parking spaces on north side of Leonard will be open.

PUBLIC COMMENTS:

Linda Cunningham, lives on North St. and she thought traffic was chaotic last year. She said there was non-stop parking and people trying to turn around. She wondered if it would make sense to change the flow of traffic on Morse St.? She feels this would allow turning into the town lot and people could get into the dentist office more easily.

- Glenn Clancy answered that the reason they had one way from Leonard to Pleasant was to direct traffic away from Belmont Center to eliminate traffic coming off Concord Ave. He said it is more logical to have traffic flow through intersection and onto Concord and take right at Concord at the light onto Pleasant.
- Epstein said there is considerable traffic coming under the bridge and Police Chief wanted to give people access to Route 2. There was concern that if people took immediate left, there would be chance for accidents.
- Epstein said they will take Linda's suggestion into consideration before final decision is made.

Katherine Venzke, owner of Helena's clothing store at 34 Leonard St. said she supports outside dining but wants to keep Leonard a two-way street. She said since this street is full of shops and restaurants, she would like to find a way to keep two lanes open and put dining on bike lane and/or parking areas. She suggested providing restaurant owners the choice of offering take out or outside dining. In Arlington, they are letting businesses decide whether they want dining or take out. The streets that have outside dining, would have two-way driving.

- Glenn Clancy replied that they didn't do two-way because it wouldn't give enough room for table and chair set up. He said the challenge is the parking. How do you maintain parking and have enough space for restaurants? He will follow up with Arlington about their plan. Also he said the Town didn't want diners to be too close to sidewalk for safety reasons.
- Chief MacIsaac said last year that the traffic routing worked well. However, he cautioned that traffic may be heavier this summer. Even if we do what we did last year, we may see different results because there were less motor vehicles on the road last summer.
- Epstein said we will revisit this. Dash said two-way pattern may be challenging on narrow Leonard St. Mass. Ave. in Arlington is much wider.

Rich Minton said he did more dining last year than any other time. He suggested that if barriers are pulled back a bit, and elongated, there would be larger area for restaurants to use. Maybe this would allow us to keep more of street and open to two-way travel. It's fortunate that most restaurants are on one side. He hopes this continues past the pandemic. He said his first priority is to make more room for restaurant seating and his second priority is two-way traffic. He thinks the parking and basic set up is fine. He thinks you could bring barriers on Starbucks side closer to curb in order to have two lanes of traffic.

- Epstein said it's possible that social distancing requirements may change and we can reconfigure sidewalks and use of parking lane. We will need to see about state guidance.

Ellen Schreiber thinks that outdoor dining and closure of Leonard St. was great. People were generally thrilled with it. She feels it breeds a sense of community and brings vibrancy to the business district. She would like to see it be a permanent feature from April to October like Newton. There should be things we can do to enhance friendliness for all businesses, like drop off areas. She suggested putting signage, like a map, in parking lot, directing people to the businesses you can access. Even valet parking may be possible. We had less time last year and we have more time now to make it work for as many people as possible.

Nick Candee thought last year was superb. He hopes this could become permanent fixture.

Norma Massarotti thinks we should try to learn from last year's experience and document all the findings from last year as well as the input from tonight's meeting. Conditions could change this year and we may learn something that is worth incorporating into a permanent plan. She would also like to see this at Cushing Square in the future.

Kevin Brosnan, town meeting member, pct. 8, said he is happy to see this program implemented again. He's fully supportive of outdoor dining.

Jarrod Goentzel raised the concept of "super block" from an article he read in the Globe yesterday. This concept frames community and commercial space by lowering speed limits. This concept can change

guidance from GPS systems and then residents can use apps to direct them to parking and traffic conditions. He said that the Belmont Community Path group is currently evaluating the design in Belmont Center so this is a good time to look forward and evaluate better traffic plans.

Ben Stanton feels that the ideal arrangement would be two lanes during day and one way lane at night. However, he added this may not be possible due to difficulty of moving the jersey barriers. He envisioned changing direction at 5:30 pm to a single lane plan. This would address the concerns for non-restaurant businesses. There could be portable fencing at either end of Leonard St and sign pointing people up Morse St. or Alexander Ave.

- MacIsaac said portable steel barriers can be launched by vehicles and people could be hit by barriers. It's necessary with single lane, to have barriers along the length of Leonard St. to demark tables. He said they talked about the cost of reconfiguring jersey barriers and there would be significant costs as well as a special truck needed for that.

Laurence MacDonald said that last year, the first traffic experiment had traffic going in the opposite direction on Leonard. It was a problem for us on Alexander Ave. to get into our houses. Three weeks later, the Town changed it to what it is now. He feels that safety for pedestrians is paramount and does think that doing two-way pattern on Leonard would be safe at any time. As parking control officer, he saw issues with people moving barriers to run across the street, rather than going to cross walks. The big unknown is traffic volume this summer.

Lisa Castagno, owner of Revolve boutique, wants to support restaurants but she feels that non-restaurant businesses were affected in a negative way. She would like to find a way to support restaurants and businesses equally. Last year we did this in the middle of pandemic, but now restaurants are open 100% and there will be more patrons. She suggests that if we must close Leonard off to a one way, then we should align with the school calendar. Change to one-way when school closes, and open it up when school starts. April to October will hurt too many businesses.

Deran Muckjian, VP of Belmont Center Business Association and owner of The Belmont Toy Shop) said that last year, all businesses were affected, and he feels that had nothing to do with outdoor dining. He said It took a lot to put the plan together, and he thought it was a success. April may be a little early to start, but he would not wait for school year to end before putting plan into effect. He said we cannot use last year as a barometer of how the plan affected businesses. He knows that most non restaurants voted in favor of it because the Association did a survey, and there was a vote of 22 to 5 in favor of outdoor dining.

Paul Rickter, town meeting member, pct. 8 said he is strongly in favor of doing the one-way plan on Leonard St. again. He thinks April 1 sounds like a good start date. If there is any interest in shortening it, then he says maybe they could stop it in September or October if pandemic abates.

Ellen Sugarman thinks the earlier we do the one-way configuration, the better. She asked if there was a way to have a cut through where there are empty parking spaces so that an alley could be created. Also, she said, it's not clear after you come through tunnel that there is parking available. Better signage could help with this problem.

- Glenn Clancy said Community Development and DPW augmented wayfinding signage a few years back. We have had conversations with property owners, particularly landlords, but they don't

want to give up their square footage. When he had addressed this with before, they thought it was a security issue that people would be parking in their lot and not going into bank. Paul wondered if there was any possibility that we could have digital signs that show the amount of parking spaces left, like Logan Airport? Also, he said, Claflin St. parking lot has never really been at capacity because there is an conception that you have to walk around block to get to Square.

- Could we construct something that could benefit the property owner as well as the businesses in Belmont? Clancy said that the Town has little leverage to ask property owners to do things. For most part, retail is at a premium in Belmont.

Alex Sheldon, works at 87 Leonard St. and he feels that having half of Leonard St. closed off is positive for businesses. Retail places can put products out on display for advertising. He asked if there have been any models done on traffic flow in the center? In terms of businesses, it may be good to have wider access to sidewalks. People will not be that confident this summer, and there will still be a level of concern regarding the pandemic and may not want to go into buildings. He felt that the concrete barriers seemed unsightly and asked if we could we get mobile barriers?

Epstein said the traffic flow has been studied but not in reference to pandemic issues.

Mr. Cunningham said if it is really important to have two-way pattern in order to benefit non-restaurant shops on lower side (on Gregory's side), has there been thought about detouring traffic from the bridge to parking lot, like a roadway to businesses? Would that satisfy businesses on that side when their side is closed off?

- MacIsaac thinks this has come up before and we can't treat parking lot as a roadway.
- Clancy said that he has looked recently at what would happen if we diverted parking into the parking lot. For safety reasons, he is concerned. He's intrigued with the idea of advertising Claflin parking lot by having people drive through it, but with volume, he cautioned that we would need to slow traffic down. Then when Farmer's Market opens up in June that introduces traffic as well. He said the Town would have to do work in that area to delineate the travel area from parking lot.
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Ellen Schreiber suggested that temporary signage may help to make unofficial cut through from parking lot to Leonard St. possible. The signs could point to businesses that would welcome people cutting through. Through the use of visual elements, you can bring attention on both sides to let people know businesses are welcoming people.

- Epstein said that he could raise this idea of temporary signage, at the Belmont Business Association.

Suzanne Schalow, of Craft Beer Seller, said that businesses should let people come through their spaces. She said anyone is welcome to go through her at store 87 Leonard St. Pandemic was not good for most businesses. Belmont Center was great last year; let's see if we can make it look even better this year. Some of the other merchants covered the jersey barriers to make them look more attractive. There are things we can do if we work together. We are lucky to have a back parking lot in Belmont Center.

Damian deMagistris said it's good to hear all these voices. We look forward to the best summer possible. Regarding cut through talk, at The Wellington, we would be willing to make signage to let

people know they can cut through our property. There are so many ways to cut through to Leonard St. from the Claflin side. He said he will talk with business neighbors and get something in place.

- Epstein said people may feel self-conscious about walking through private property, so it would be nice to have signage.

Rich Minton suggested creating a permanent, universal cut through sign. We don't have community seating in center. Tables are separated by establishment. For instance, would Wellington mind him having Comella bakery items on their seats? He would feel uncomfortable sitting on other seats unless there was some signage.

- Epstein replied that the space in front of each restaurant is intended for that restaurant, we are not creating a food court..
- Dash said each establishment is licensed for their spaces and you can't have people walk in and out. If it is not a busy time, the pedestrian could ask if they could sit, but it cannot be an uncontrolled space especially with liquor being served.

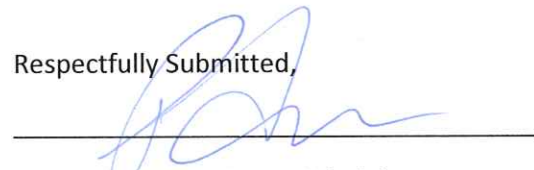
Deran Muckjian said jersey barriers were donated, but, trees, plants, etc. had to be paid for by merchants. Last year, some businesses had signs saying that they allowed customers to cut through. But last year, some stores didn't want people coming through due to exposure to COVID. This year, stores may be more receptive. But we are limited to changing the scope and placement of the barriers.

Ellen Sugarman asked if there could be increased numbers of handicapped parking on Leonard for elderly and disabled?

- Clancy said there are accessible handicap spaces. The number of spaces is based on formula based on total parking spot availability. The town's goal is to always keep the proper number of handicapped places.
- Epstein thanked people for participating. He said that the Select Board will have to do more info gathering before completed plan is configured. He feels April 1 may be an unrealistic start date. The Business Association indicated that they wanted it to be later.
- Dash cautioned that we can't wait too long to make decision since the business owners need to prepare. It seems there is not a lot left to discuss. Summer traffic is always lighter, and he believes that cars should not be prioritized over pedestrians. The recent article in the Boston Globe about how towns and cities are planning to set up outdoor dining on a permanent basis is very interesting. Belmont may lose customers if Davis Sq., Harvard Sq. and other places close their traffic permanently every Summer. Leonard Street is not wide enough to do what some other municipalities are doing by still allowing a lot of traffic through. Last year was an anomaly. There is still a lot of parking in Claflin and signage may help to utilize that parking lot. He feels that changing to one lane could work from Patriots' Day to Halloween.
- Caputo thanked everyone for coming out and sharing their perspective. The Select Board received 350 emails on this subject; more than any other issue, and the majority were receptive to closure of street again. He appreciates the sensitivity on the retail side. In terms of timing, we can debate about April 1 being right date. He thinks merchants deserve advance warning and the issue should be decided at the March 15 meeting.
- Epstein thanked Glenn Clancy, Jay Marcotte and Chief MacIsaac

Motion to adjourn was approved by the Select Board by a vote of (3-0).

Respectfully Submitted,



PATRICE GARVIN, Town Administrator