

PLANNING BOARD MEETING

March 13, 2003

Minutes

Members present: Deborah Emello, Karl Haglund, James Heigham, Andrew McClurg

Members absent: Joseph Barrell

Also present: Tim Higgins, Senior Planner
Jeffrey Wheeler, Planning Coordinator

7:00 p.m. Andrew McClurg, acting as Chairman for this Work Session, called the meeting to order. He noted that this Work Session is on the Trapelo Road/Belmont Street Corridor Study. The first part of the meeting will be a slide show presentation by the Belmont Citizen Forum. It is a preliminary show with the final version being shown on April 1st.

Sue Bass gave a brief introduction of the rationale behind the presentation. It is designed to promote public discourse and create questions not answers. Cara Noferi from the Belmont Citizen Forum then presented a series of slides of the corridor. She narrated with the emphasis being on the many opportunities that are available within the study area. Several graphics illustrated potential sidewalk improvements and traffic calming techniques. Retaining historically significant structures was also recommended.

7:40 p.m. Andrew McClurg noted that the intent of the meeting is to give staff and the Board guidance on how the corridor should look. It will be expressed through a goals statement. Mr. McClurg then opened a discussion on the development of goals statements. An outline of the topics raised at previous meetings was presented on a board along with some draft goal statements. They were for discussion only and not complete or final proposals. The goals presented were culled from similar work in other communities.

He began talking about reducing pavement width and improving street design to promote pedestrian movements. There was a question about the control of the traffic signals along the corridor (it has since been determined that the Town controls the timing of these signals.) Questions were raised as to the impacts on parking. Tim Higgins noted that the cost of creating new off-street parking spaces is prohibitive. Therefore, regulatory changes must be seriously considered even though it will be difficult politically to implement them. With no opportunities to improve off-street parking, on-street parking is essential in the neighborhood abutting the business districts. Tim Higgins mentioned Arlington's Massachusetts Avenue approval of this situation. Discussion followed on the need for new off-street spaces to properly reflect the scale of the neighborhoods. Commuter parking versus local business parking was brought forward for consideration. The impact of additional public transportation on parking also needs to be identified.

Additional residential density (2-3 stories over single level stores) is beneficial to businesses and the vitality of the commercial areas. However, it requires parking; this needs to be addressed.

The goal of improving the character of the business district was proposed. Promoting locally owned businesses over “chain retailers” was discussed. An evaluation of signage (re: design standards) should be done. Also, the administration of the permitting and inspections should be looked into.

A goal of revising and improving the existing zoning was proposed. This is a very important issue and involves creating density as mentioned earlier. Tim Higgins suggested the issue be framed geographically employing “Village Centers”. Thus, density increases would be in very specific areas (re: the business areas). There are already excellent examples of three-story buildings within the Town and along the corridor. They are not out of scale and can actually improve the aesthetics of the surrounding area. Landmark building preservation should also be important and reflected in the zoning (re: Waverley Fire Station). The intent of modifying the zoning is to create incentives for things to happen that we want. It raises the question of how much commercial development is optimum? Should it occur only at the squares? Or, along the entire corridor? These questions will be answered as the planning process proceeds.

Jennifer Page recommends that the goals adopted by the Planning Board reflect planning for 25 years into the future. She believes that little will occur in the short term. There was agreement on this.

Promoting Economic Development as a goal was discussed. This is a broad goal which includes portions of some of the proposed goals discussed above. It also includes regulatory improvements.

“Supporting and Improving the Residential Character” was accepted as a goal. An objective would be to return residential blocks with pre-existing, non-conforming uses to all residential. Would this include residential oriented businesses? This was not resolved.

The larger question was raised that if streetscape and physical improvements are made, will pedestrians return to the corridor? Unfortunately, people tend to walk less and less and drive more. It was observed that driving to a Village Center is acceptable, provided that once people arrive; they walk to several establishments while they are there. Creating and/or emphasizing a Village Center concept was generally accepted as an appropriate goal.

The question of how much revenue will be raised through the revitalization of the corridor was brought up. It is not expected to be substantial but there are other benefits as well. For example, improving what we have influences the overall quality of life by enhancing the vitality of the business districts, improving them aesthetically and making them desirable places for residents to visit and shop. This project is not a panacea to the Town’s fiscal problems.

The question of restaurants was raised. People want more and better restaurants. Should this be included in the goals and objectives? Tim Higgins opined that a full liquor license is essential for a first class restaurant to locate in Belmont. Jeffrey Wheeler illustrated the zoning district maps showing the large LBIII areas along the corridor. This district does not allow restaurants. A discussion followed. Jeffrey Wheeler noted that the current definition of restaurants should also be changed and refined.

Mr. McClurg closed the discussion by noting that a first draft of the proposed goals and objectives will be created from the meeting. It will be posted on the web site the first of next week. The Planning Board will continue this discussion and other corridor related issues during its March 25th meeting at 7:35 p.m. He thanked everyone for attending and participating.

9:20 p.m. General Business Items:

The Board voted 4:0 to approve the minutes from the February 25, 2003 executive session.

The Boards voted 4:0 to allow Roberta Sydney (representing the Kendall family) to move forward with their Design and Site Plan Review submittal without the required topography and drainage. Due to the snow this information has yet to be collected. It will be submitted during the public hearing process.

Jeffrey Wheeler sent the Board a draft report on the side-yard setback zoning revision within the LBII and LBII zoning districts. Does the Board wish to proceed with the petition at the April Town Meeting? The Boards voted 4:0 to place the article on the Warrant.

9:30 p.m. There being no further business, the meeting was adjourned.