

VISION 21 IMPLEMENTATION COMMITTEE
Minutes for the Meeting of March 17, 2005
Approved 4/7/05

Members present: Victoria Haase, Tim Higgins, Meg O'Brien, Sara Oaklander, Jennifer Page, Paul Solomon, Diane Stafford, Barry Winston

Members absent: Matt Hausmann

Others present: Roger Colton, Jenny Fallon, Delores Keefe

1. Call to Order

Chair, Jennifer Page, called the meeting to order at 7:05 p.m. The minutes of March 6, 2005 were approved.

2. A Proposed Initiative by the Belmont Housing Trust

Jennifer outlined the connection between the language of the Vision Statement and the VIC's consideration of the proposal by the Belmont Housing Trust concerning the potential future development of the Our Lady of Mercy Church property. The VIC has been discussing how to clarify and enhance the public input process of various town committees. How does this tie-in to the Vision?

The Vision includes the following statements:

- We, the Belmont community, make a commitment to: foster and maintain open and inclusive decision making.
- We will promote the involvement of all residents in the life of our community, support citizen involvement in town affairs, and rely on an effective, representative local government.

These statements support our focus on promoting citizen involvement as a part of good decision making and good government in Belmont, and it is appropriate for us to advise and assist the Belmont Housing Trust on the public outreach process around their new initiative for the development of an important property in Belmont.

Jennifer introduced Roger Colton, Chairman of the Board of Directors of the Belmont Housing Trust, Inc. Roger is also the former Chair of the Fair Housing Committee, a member of the Belmont Human Rights Commission, a member of BEDPG, and was chair of the Waverly Square Fire Station Re-Use Committee. The Belmont Housing Trust was authorized by Town Meeting, established by statute and appointed by the Board of Selectmen. Their mission is to promote and develop affordable housing in Belmont. They have a proposal for a development on the Our Lady of Mercy properties, which will likely come on the market in 6 – 12 months.

The properties include the church, the rectory, a small vacant parcel next to Oakley Rd., the parish hall and the parking lot. The current zoning is for single family residences with a minimum lot size of 9,000 sq. ft.

The Trust received a grant from the Local Initiative Support Organization, which supports financing for affordable housing projects, with which they have hired an architect and a development consultant to assist with the development of this proposal. The assessed value of the property is \$6.1 million. Assuming that that will be the purchase price, it would be impossible to cover the purchase and development costs of the site with a development of single family houses under the current zoning (assuming a maximum of 6 houses selling at \$1 million each). It is very likely that the property will be purchased by a developer intending to create high density housing under Chapter 40B. The Housing Trust is concerned that the outcome could be a development out of character with and unacceptable to the surrounding neighborhood, which will make Belmont residents uncomfortable with and unsupportive of affordable housing development.

What if the Housing Trust were the developer? The Trust has proposed to buy the property for \$6.1 million, collaborating with others, and create a “friendly” 40B development of housing units. This proposal would buy local control over the development. They have begun meeting with residents of the neighboring area to educate them about the future of the parcel. There will be significant change to the neighborhood, and the question now is who will be in control of it. The Trust presented their proposal to the neighbors, including the following policy decisions:

1. No building will be taller than the highest existing house, 2 ½ stories.
2. The rectory will be kept, probably as two condominium units.
3. The number of units on the parking lot parcel will be six.
4. Of the 31 proposed units, 11 would be for sale at market rate and 20 would be rental units with 9 of those being affordable units.

The Trust has made it clear in all meetings that they will be the decision makers for the project, but they are seeking significant community input. What they have heard from the neighbors so far includes:

1. They would like to see the project reduced to 25 – 28 units. It is unclear how much flexibility the Trust has under the proposed funding structure.
2. They value green space as part of any development.
3. They want parking spaces hidden behind buildings to the extent possible.
4. They do not put great value on preserving the church building, although the Historic District Commission does. The church would have to be significantly changed to be converted to housing in any case.

While this proposal is a significant change for the neighborhood, there would be some benefit to local control. The Trust has made it clear that the project must support the \$6.1 million purchase price to have any chance of winning the bidding for the property. If the purchase price goes higher, the Trust will not be able to compete. They hope to start community discussion with residents and other town boards to create support for this project and create political will around it, which may make the property look less attractive to other developers who may propose higher density projects.

Tim Higgins said that state smart growth guidelines project 20 units per acre as a minimum density for 40B developments. That is approximately what this proposal represents.

The Trust is seeking input from all interested parties and plans to continue to present this project to other town boards. The VIC may be able to be helpful with the community outreach, education and planning process.

3. Progress Report on the Process for the Community Media Center

Barry Winston reported on the work of the Conveners who have been appointed to create a new solution for Belmont's Cable TV community access station. Comcast is divesting itself of all of its local access stations and will end its ownership of Belmont's Channel 8 as of July 1. The Conveners have been working with a consultant and looking at solutions from many other towns to craft a solution for Belmont. They have decided to create a non-profit station, with a 9 person Board of Directors. They will appoint the first Directors, who will subsequently be appointed by the Directors themselves, the Board of Selectmen and the School Committee. They are currently working on the by-laws, including decisions about the mission, the make up of the board, what committees there will be, how many staff there will be, and who will hire the staff. How the station will be funded is also being considered. Next steps will be to identify the Directors and hire an Executive Director.

4. BEDPG

Sara Oaklander thanked VIC members for input into the BEDPG final report. The report will be ready to be distributed to the Selectmen ahead of the March 28th meeting when BEDPG will formally present it.

5. Sustainable Belmont

Jennifer Page reported on the second meeting of Sustainable Belmont. Members of the Conservation Commission gave a presentation about the proposed new Wetlands By-Law. The group gave feed back, including the need for clear public education and the identification of the main issues raised by the by-law. There were suggestions about how to do the public outreach and what materials might be prepared. Jennifer and Jenny, along with Jan Kruse and Heather Tuttle, Co-Chairs of Sustainable Belmont, met with the Conservation Commission's By-Law Sub-Committee to continue discussion of the public process. The Conservation Commission has revised its timeline as a result of this input. They will not bring the by-law to the April Town Meeting, but will continue the public outreach and input process.

Consideration of the draft mandate for Sustainable Belmont was put over to the next VIC meeting.

6. Neighbors Network

Jennifer reported that the Neighbors network has met and begun to consider the site for their next "Meet Belmont" event. Proposed sites are the High School cafeteria and the Town Hall auditorium, which is currently housing OCD.

7. Town Day

Jennifer asked for a show of interest in arranging for and staffing a VIC table at Town Day on May 21st. There was general agreement that we should have a table. Both Sustainable Belmont and the Neighbors Network would contribute to it. Several members agreed to help, and Delores and Jennifer will investigate how we can arrange for space.

The meeting adjourned at 9:05 p.m.

Respectfully submitted,

Jenny Fallon, Secretary Pro-Tem