

PRELIMINARY GENERAL PLAN

TECHNICAL REPORT NO. 5
A GENERAL PLAN FOR BELMONT, MASS.

PREPARED FOR THE BELMONT PLANNING BOARD
ADAMS, HOWARD & GREELEY, PLANNING CONSULTANTS
FEBRUARY, 1963

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P R E L I M I N A R Y G E N E R A L P L A N

This is one of a series of reports on a General Plan for Belmont. It presents background material for the plan in a convenient form for review and discussion.

Material in this report may be superseded in the final General Plan report as a result of such discussions.

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Prepared for the BELMONT PLANNING BOARD

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I N T R O D U C T I O N

The principal purpose of a General Plan for a community is to provide a sound guide for future land development and the provision of adequate transportation and community facilities, all of which affect each other. It analyzes future needs and how they can be met, and then recommends the policies which should be followed if the desired results are to be achieved.

This preliminary General Plan brings together the results of the preceding published studies of community facilities, traffic circulation and parking, and business district improvement, as well as the earlier study of alternative land development policies for Belmont.

The above studies explored each part of the over-all plan in depth. The preliminary General Plan is the first published report which considers the relationship of one study to another and brings them into a single focus. The preliminary plan also reflects the comments and reactions of citizens and public officials to the earlier studies insofar as they are available, and makes several specific proposals for further comment.

Major features of the plan are:

1. Retention of the policy permitting only single-family housing development in the remaining areas presently zoned for that purpose.
2. Introduction of various kinds of apartment development possibilities on specific sites, usually where such development would replace less attractive uses.

3. The consolidation and improvement of established business centers and the discouragement of business uses outside of them, to make the centers more economically sound and at the same time to improve the appearance of the town.
4. The construction of a new town hall and central fire station on the Penny Land and adjacent land on Concord Avenue, freeing the present sites for apartment or commercial development.
5. Selection of alternative sites for new public school buildings, the final locations being dependent on which program of construction is adopted.
6. The provision of a playground site on Belmont Hill which may also serve as a future school site.
7. The provision of adequate parking in business centers, and the extension of Channing Road to the Concord Turnpike to relieve Cross Street as a thoroughfare in the Winn Brook area.

Recommendations included in this preliminary General Plan, like those in preceding reports, remain tentative and comments are invited from town officials and the general public. In the meantime, zoning by-law revisions are being prepared to provide the principal tool for implementing the land use aspects of the plan. The culmination of the General Plan program will be the publication of a final report which will reflect, as far as possible, the discussion of and reaction to these preliminary proposals.

I. THE LAND USE PLAN

The plan of future land use basically reflects the existing development pattern because (1) most of the land in Belmont and immediately adjacent areas is almost completely developed and (2) most of the residential areas are well maintained and are expected to remain so during the coming years. The following discussion, therefore, is mainly concerned with proposed changes in the future land development pattern.

Single-Family Residential Use

It is assumed that any remaining open areas in the existing Single-Family Residence zoning district will follow present residential patterns, if developed at all. This assumption includes the so-called Rapolli land fronting on the Concord Turnpike at the crest of Belmont Hill. Although several attempts have been made to allow commercial or apartment uses in this area, commercial use is not deemed feasible because the land will stand high above and isolated from the future expressway (which will be in a deep cut at this point in order to achieve a minimum grade); and apartment use is considered inappropriate—not only because it would be strongly opposed by neighboring home owners but because the location is too far removed from any convenience-shopping area.

It is also anticipated that at least one of the several large areas of land now being withheld from residential development on Belmont Hill

will be opened to such development in the coming two decades (as did the Arlmont Golf Course in the last decade). The Land Use Plan indicates the former McLean Hospital land west of Mill Street as the most likely new area to be so developed, since the wells have been abandoned and a new outfall sewer line is being built through the property. Alternatively, the so-called Atkins Estate on the north side of Concord Avenue or the Belmont Country Club might be so developed.

Two-Family Residential Use

Any open areas left in existing two-family residential areas should be developed with either single or two-family dwellings, with the exception of two large isolated tracts of vacant land now within the present General Residence zoning district which are proposed for garden apartment development in the following section.

It should be noted that, while the opposite side of Belmont Street (in Watertown) is now zoned to a 100-foot depth for apartments from Grove to Common Street, preliminary indications are that such zoning will be eliminated under the current planning program in Watertown.

Future development of the Oakley Country Club is also now unlikely to affect Belmont adversely, since the Club has decided to build a new clubhouse and continue operations of the golf course. Watertown's planners are currently recommending that, if the golf course is ever abandoned, Watertown should take the land as an open park area to preclude incurring heavy public costs for the provision of community

facilities and services. In the event that some form of intensive development should take place at this location in the future, Belmont might have to reappraise its own land development policies in the area.

Multi-Family Residential Use

The desirability of a limited amount of apartment construction in Belmont has been argued strongly, both pro and con, for a number of years. While some economic benefit might be derived from such construction if of the right type, an earlier report has shown that the effect on the tax rate would not be substantial enough to justify the adoption of such a policy solely on this basis.¹ On the other hand, a few well-designed apartment developments on carefully selected sites would add to the variety of housing accommodations available to Belmont residents and might make it possible for older persons with grown-up families to remain in the community.

Another important consideration which apparently has not entered into the discussion is the possible use of apartments as a substitute for some other less desirable land use. Without urban renewal or some other form of public subsidy, land which is now developed can only be cleared for a new building which will net a considerably larger return to cover

¹ Alternative Land Development Policies for the Town of Belmont, February, 1962.

both the cost of buying and removing existing buildings and the cost of building a new one. Thus, if the town wished to induce the removal of unattractive commercial developments it could only do so by permitting the substitution of even more intensive commercial establishments (for which there often will not be a market) or of some form of multi-family development.

The following proposals are based on the assumption that the town is ready to consider a limited amount of apartment development in cases where such a use would be more desirable than any other existing or potential use, and where the locations selected would not be detrimental to established single-family areas.

1. Garden Apartments

Garden apartments, as proposed in this plan, would have only two stories, a large amount of landscaped open area around them, and no more dwelling units per net acre than are allowed in two-family areas. Only two garden apartment areas are proposed.

The first area would include the present vacant land south of Little Pond and on both sides of Brighton Street. The larger parcel on the east side of Brighton Street was recently purchased at a high price based on the present two-family zoning, making single-family homes impractical from an economic point of view. This site could be much more attractively developed with garden apartments, which would house no more families than would otherwise be permitted yet would have a proportion of open space commensurate with single-family areas in the town.¹ The area is appropriate

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Regulations which would assure such conditions will be proposed in the next report, which will cover zoning by-law and map revisions.

for apartment development because of (a) its proximity to the future Route 2 expressway and the new collector street (extension of Channing Road) proposed in the Traffic Circulation Plan, (b) its separation from other residential areas by the M.D.C. Little Pond reservation, (c) its proximity to the railroad and present industrial developments in Belmont and Cambridge, as well as future industrial development anticipated in adjacent portions of Cambridge, (d) the availability of public bus transportation, and (e) the fairly close proximity of an existing convenience-shopping area (with another proposed on the site).

The other parcel, on the opposite side of Brighton Street, is proposed for garden apartment use mainly because it is such poor land that no other attractive development seems economically feasible. It is appropriate for such use for the same reasons as the other larger site, lacking only a green buffer between it and several nearby single-family houses.

The second area proposed for garden apartments is the present rough land next to the Beaver Brook Reservation at the foot of Spring and Moraine Streets. The land is not likely to be developed for one and two-family houses because of drainage and sanitary sewer outfall problems, but it might be reclaimed for several two-story apartment buildings with lower site preparation costs. It would be advantageous for such development because of its isolation from most of the other residential areas and its proximity to bus transportation and a convenience-shopping area.

2. High-Rise Apartments

High-rise apartment buildings with a maximum height of 80 feet (8 or 9 stories) are proposed for two sites at the foot of Belmont Hill, which would provide an excellent background for them. Both would probably be luxury apartments because of the high cost of the sites and the relatively low density of 70 families per acre which is proposed.

The first is the present Town Hall site, as suggested in earlier reports. The land is on a steep slope which would make it difficult to redevelop with a new town office complex, while a tall apartment building could use the site effectively and its sale would help defray the cost of new town offices on Concord Avenue. Commercial re-use of

the site would be less desirable because of the traffic and parking problems that would be created. As a location for an apartment it is ideal, being near a center of commercial activity, on a bus line, and near a possible future rapid transit stop.

The second would be the site of the present greenhouses and service station at Pleasant Street and Trapelo Road. A non-commercial use is desirable to consolidate and strengthen the Waverley Square shopping area, and a high apartment building is considered to be economically feasible. The re-alignment of Pleasant Street as proposed would greatly enhance the site, separating it from the railroad. The location is also good for such a use since it is near both good transportation and a convenience-shopping area. A large office building on this site might be considered as an alternative use, but the development of adequate controls for such a building would require the setting up of a special office zoning district in which retail uses would be specifically excluded.

3. Other Apartments

Other apartment types proposed would be only two or three stories in height and would house not more than twice as many families per acre as is allowed in two-family areas of the town. Proposed locations are limited to various business areas on main streets. Their purposes would be primarily (a) to provide a better use of land than now exists at the site and (b) to consolidate presently over-extended business areas. A good alternative to such use, but one of limited potential, is a non-commercial use such as the private teen club now being established on Flett Road in a former commercial building.

Possibilities other than those shown on the Preliminary General Plan might be on the north side of Concord Avenue between Underwood and Baker Streets, and on Belmont Street between School Street and the Cambridge city line. In the latter location it may prove desirable to replace the little stores which have deteriorated to wholesale and light industrial uses because of lack of retail sales potential. While it is proposed that a few local business areas be retained at main intersections, some other use must be found for the areas in between. The problem of improved use of the area is compounded by the small but

unattractive light industrial development on the Watertown side of the street, no improvement of which is thus far anticipated in the General Plan now being prepared for Watertown.

Commercial Uses

The Preliminary General Plan proposes three classes of consolidated business areas: (a) small local business areas primarily serving the immediate neighborhood; (b) larger general business districts serving a wide area; and (c) automotive service districts which specialize in a particular service which does not seriously compete with those furnished in the other business districts. It proposes that each district be consolidated and that commercial uses be discouraged between them. Specific examples of how this could be accomplished are shown in Technical Report No. 3.

1. Local Business

The plan reflects existing local business areas but proposes that the area of each be restricted to that now developed, because there is no real market for more local business and any additional amount would probably overtax the market and result in business failures and deterioration of the commercial buildings.

The largest proposed district is at Beech Street. It is recommended that this be restricted to local business use so as not to be overly competitive with the Cushing and Waverley Square centers and to stimulate improvement in the appearance of Trapelo Road. The only other district needing special mention is that at Brighton Street next to the railroad, which could be developed to serve the future residential development in the immediate area and possibly encourage the retail re-use of the existing industrial buildings.

2. General Business

The principal general business areas shown on the plan are the present three main centers at Belmont Center, Cushing Square and Waverley Square. It is recommended that each be consolidated into a smaller area than at present, except for the provision of additional parking space as recommended in Reports No. 2 and 3.

Some business men have expressed the opinion that the districts should be enlarged rather than consolidated. However, it is considered a more desirable policy to first revitalize the existing centers by providing adequate parking and extensive internal improvements; then, if they are commercially successful and the need for more space is actually demonstrated, they could be expanded. Caution should be exercised in considering the expansion of any existing district beyond that actually needed; otherwise, marginal uses and the kind of blight already prevalent along Trapelo Road and Belmont Street would be encouraged.

The two other proposed general business areas would serve special purposes different from those of the above three districts. The small area on Blanchard Road is so classified because it has not proven feasible as a local business area and caters essentially to passing traffic, while the area east of Little Pond next to the Concord Turnpike would provide for the logical expansion of existing office development by the owner, Arthur D. Little, Inc. The latter area abuts proposed industrial and business uses in adjacent Cambridge and is separated from other residential areas in Belmont by the M.D.C. Little Pond Reservation.

3. Automotive Service

No expansion of the existing automotive service area on Pleasant Street and Trapelo Road is anticipated, except for the possible conversion of existing non-automotive uses in the Pleasant Street area. Voluntary screening of the areas with low walls or hedges is recommended to improve their appearance.

Light Industrial Use

The plan shows only the existing light industrial area on Blanchard Road next to the B & M Railroad; no other location seems feasible or desirable for such use.

Light industrial uses now occupy scattered frontages along Belmont Street and Trapelo Road. These are nonconforming uses under the existing zoning by-law so cannot be expanded. Since the existing light industrial area on Blanchard Road is almost completely built-up, these nonconforming uses will have to be located outside of Belmont if they are replaced by less detrimental uses, as proposed in an earlier section of this report.

Semi-Public Use

The plan shows only the existing major semi-public uses of land in the town. No expansion is anticipated nor are additional semi-public uses proposed, since so much of the land is already so used.

Public

Most of the public uses of land are described in the following section on Community Facilities. The only others are the City of Cambridge reservoir on Payson Road, which is an indispensable part of the Cambridge water system, and the State Hospital land on Concord Avenue west of the town incinerator, which is also unlikely to be released from such use in the foreseeable future.

II. THE COMMUNITY FACILITIES PLAN

Requirements for community facilities in Belmont have been fully discussed in Technical Reports No. 1 and 4. Most of the sites shown on the General Plan are presently used for the purposes designated.

Since a number of facilities of various types have been proposed on the Concord Avenue grounds, now largely owned by the town, Figure 1 has been prepared to demonstrate that all of the proposed uses could be incorporated on the site in an attractive manner through careful planning. The area shown incorporates the existing lumber yard and gas station at the west end of the site (as well as two existing dwellings next to the playfields) in order: (a) to provide the additional area necessary to accommodate all the proposed facilities and (b) most importantly, to improve the appearance of the area by eliminating those commercial uses which are out of character with other existing and proposed uses.

Pending adoption of a specific plan for meeting future school building needs, the General Plan indicates all of the potential sites which might be needed under any one of the alternatives considered in Technical Report No. 4,—including the possibility that a new location will have to be found for the junior high school. The only new site which will have to be acquired for playground and/or school purposes is on Belmont Hill. The site indicated on Marsh Street is the only one which will adequately meet access requirements from the most densely settled areas on the Hill.

Proposed expansion of the Belmont cemetery would be on additional land to be acquired in Cambridge adjacent to the present cemetery. This proposed use conforms to the land use recommendations included in Cambridge's General Plan.

The only other major additional land acquisitions or reservations proposed are for two parks. The Underwood Estate in the center of the town, with its pleasantly wooded slopes, would be a very desirable park requiring a minimum of improvements. Retention of its present open character would enhance the town center and its central location makes it readily accessible to many residents. The use of the Atkins Estate on Belmont Hill as a park is also indicated on the General Plan on the understanding that the present owners might be willing to leave it undeveloped for public use through some arrangement with the town. In the case of either estate, use as a park could be by gift, purchase, or public use easement with private ownership retained.

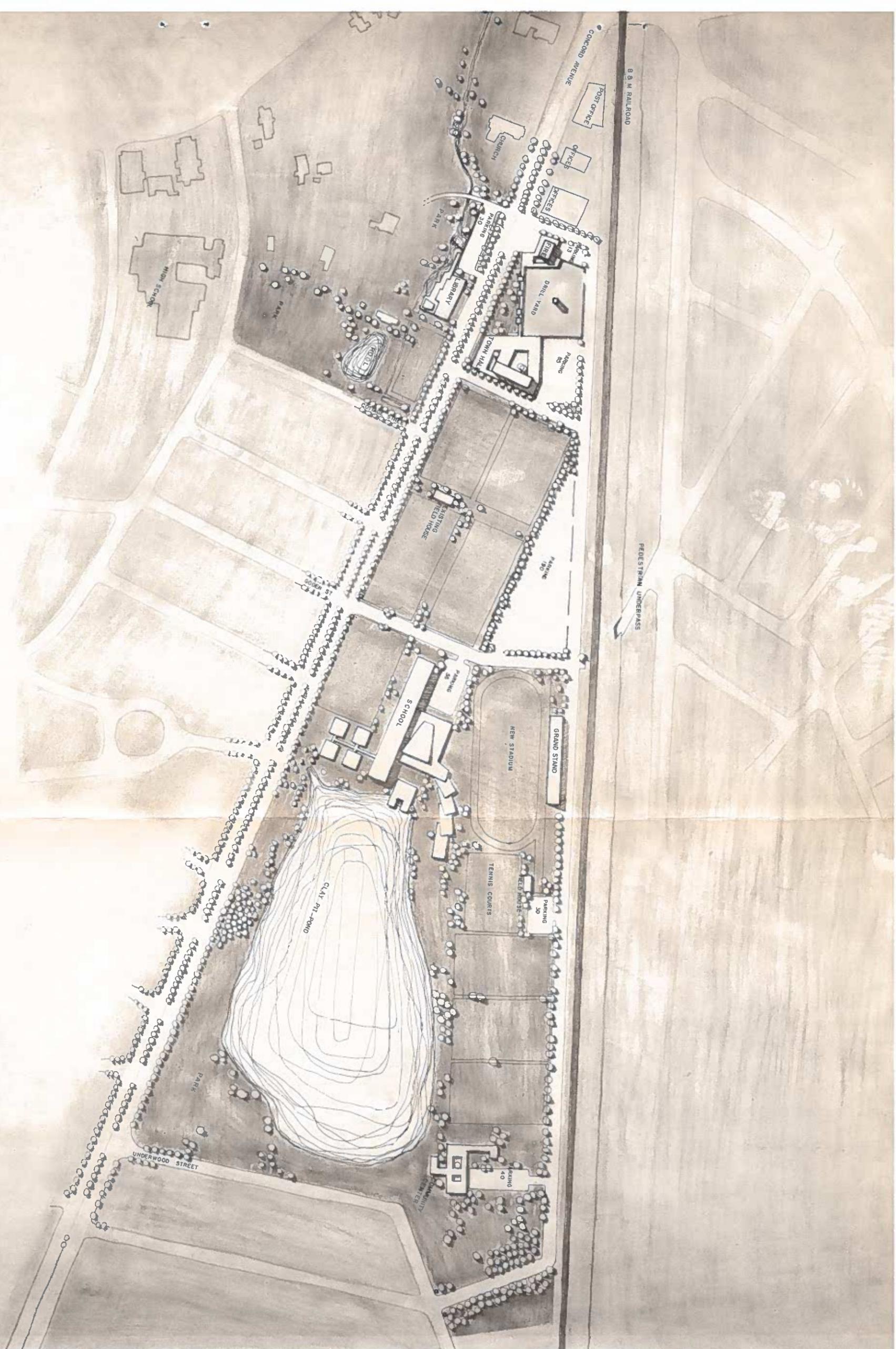


Figure 1.

ILLUSTRATIVE SITE PLAN FOR CONCORD AVENUE GROUNDS



CIRCULATION SYSTEM

- STATE EXPRESSWAY
(SCHEMATIC ILLUSTRATION - PLANS NOT YET FIRM)
- MAJOR STREET
- COLLECTOR STREET
- LOCAL STREET
- PROPOSED NEW WAY

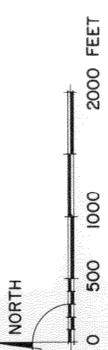


LAND USE AND COMMUNITY FACILITIES

- RESIDENTIAL**
 - SINGLE FAMILY
 - TWO FAMILY
 - GARDEN APARTMENT
 - HIGH-RISE APARTMENT
 - LOW-RISE APARTMENT
- COMMERCIAL**
 - LOCAL BUSINESS
 - GENERAL BUSINESS
 - AUTOMOTIVE SERVICE
- LIGHT INDUSTRIAL**
- MAJOR SEMI-PUBLIC**
 - HOSPITAL
 - SCHOOL
 - GOLF COURSE
- PUBLIC**
- COMMUNITY FACILITIES**
 - C CEMETERY
 - O TOWN OFFICES
 - CC COMMUNITY CENTER
 - P POLICE STATION
 - CD CIVIL DEFENSE HDQ
 - PF PLAYFIELD
 - F FIRE STATION
 - PG PLAYGROUND
 - G TOWN GARAGES
 - PK PARK
 - L LIBRARY
 - S SCHOOL
 - ML MUNICIPAL LIGHT
 - W WATER DEPT
 - S-PG INTERCHANGEABLE SCHOOL OR PLAYGROUND SITE
- OTHER**

TOWN OF BELMONT, MASS. PRELIMINARY GENERAL PLAN

BELMONT PLANNING BOARD - FEBRUARY, 1963



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Figure 2

THE PREPARATION OF THIS MAP WAS FINANCED IN PART THROUGH AN URBAN PLANNING GRANT FROM THE HOUSING AND HOME FINANCE AGENCY UNDER THE PROVISIONS OF SECTION 701 OF THE HOUSING ACT OF 1954, AS AMENDED.