

COMMUNITY FACILITIES (EXCEPT SCHOOLS & RECREATION)

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

PREPARED FOR THE BELMONT PLANNING BOARD
ADAMS, HOWARD & GREELEY, PLANNING CONSULTANTS
DECEMBER, 1962

C O M M U N I T Y F A C I L I T I E S
(Except Schools and Recreation)

This is one of a series of reports on the various elements to be included in 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Material in this report may be superseded in a later report or in the General Plan report as a result of such discussions and studies of other elements of the plan which may affect this one.

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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

Community facilities include all public buildings and land designed to serve the residents of the town. They do not, however, include public utilities such as water and sewerage systems.

In Belmont, where so little additional land is left for future development, a major emphasis in the General Plan will be upon the adequacy of and possible improvements in community facilities.

The public school system usually represents the largest and most important community facility, and this is certainly true in the case of Belmont. Because of its importance and the need for close collaboration with the School Committee and its administrative staff in the development of findings and recommendations, the future needs of the school system will be discussed in a separate report. This will also include a section on recreation facilities. Meanwhile, attention will be focused in this monograph on the other elements in the community facilities plan.

Final recommendations, where necessary or appropriate, will be included in the General Plan report when all elements of the plan have been assembled, review discussions have been held, and a consistent set of recommendations can be made taking into consideration all of the various needs of the town.

I. LIBRARIES

Location and Accessibility

The proposed location for a new central library on Concord Avenue is central to the town and easily accessible. The two branch libraries are well located in the most densely populated areas of the town.

Space Provision and Requirements

The new library will presumably meet all modern and foreseeable space requirements. By American Library Association standards, branch libraries are not necessary in a town the size of Belmont. However, the existing branches are technically only reading rooms or book distribution points, providing a convenience to the neighborhoods in which they are located.

Conclusions

The construction of a new library to replace the present obsolete building should be programmed as soon as possible in view of the long recognized need.

It is recommended that the new building be designed to facilitate its cultural function and enrich the experience of the users. Its design should be sympathetic with the particular nature of the site and strong consideration is urged to the recommendation that the war memorial be incorporated in a formal garden related to the back of the library; imaginative design taking maximum advantage of Wellington Brook could result in an attractive setting for outdoor use by library patrons as well as for strollers enjoying a brookside path. Finally, due regard should be given in both design and siting to the interests of the adjoining property owners from whom the site has been acquired.

II. TOWN OFFICES

Location and Accessibility

The Town Hall and Town Hall Annex have good accessibility, being in the main commercial center and geographically central to the town, with easy access for pedestrians, motorists, and public transport patrons.

Space Provision

Town offices and two veterans groups now occupy a total of 13,000 square feet of floor space in the Town Hall and Annex (see Table I); this does not include the Town Hall auditorium, corridors, or service areas.

While the two buildings appear to be structurally sound and in good repair, they are load-bearing brick structures with wood floors, stairs, and roof which constitute a serious fire hazard. Although the buildings are repositories for many valuable records, there are no provisions for fire-proofing.

Town office space should be flexible in layout to permit re-allocation of space when demanded by redistribution of the workload among various departments, changes in the over-all administrative structure, changing demands of the times for different public services, or efforts to increase efficiency. The present physical layout of the town offices, split between two separate structures and housed on many levels with no large continuous floor areas, is highly inflexible, resulting in inefficient use of the available space and little potential for space reorganization or expansion.

Space Requirements

A survey of present and future additional space requirements demonstrates the need for approximately 20,500 square feet of office space, nearly 60 per cent more than the present 13,000 square feet.

A survey of existing departments (Table I) found that at least 2,760 square feet of additional floor space are needed immediately to relieve inefficient crowding. Another 1,340 square feet were requested for uses over and above bare minimum requirements. Finally, a highly conservative estimate of another 1,825 square feet was projected to meet anticipated space demands over the next 20 years. Thus, approximately 6,000 square feet of additional office space, or 46 per cent more than is now available, is needed to meet present and foreseeable requirements of departments now housed in the Town Hall and Annex.

Additional space requirements beyond those documented by the survey must also be considered: (1) The Belmont Planning Board has no office nor storage space for its records and materials, which are now distributed in various offices and homes; at least 500 square feet should be provided for meeting, office, and storage purposes; (2) a general conference room for use of any department or board as needed, or for other boards and special committees which might be appointed in the future, would necessitate another 500 square feet of space; and (3) the Water Department is estimated to require approximately 3,000 square feet of office space, some of which might eventually be incorporated into the central town offices (see further discussion under Water Department below). Total space required for these additional functions would thus represent at least 1,500 square feet.

Total office space requirements documented above are 20,500 square feet. Allowing about 30 per cent for corridors, stairways, and service areas, the total building floor space needed would be about 30,000 square feet. A new town auditorium would require at least another 7,000 square feet, but the present assumption is that either the existing auditorium will be

Table I

INVENTORY OF OFFICE SPACE REQUIREMENTS

Department	Present area	Additional area required now - inefficient operation	Additional area desired now - improved efficiency and amenity	Future needs
	(a r e a i n s q u a r e f e e t)			
<u>Town Hall</u>				
Selectmen	510	-	-	-
Town Clerk	990	-	-	-
Accounting	455	1000	-	500
Assessors	957	-	10	45
Town Engineer	583	680	-	180
Building	70	300	-	100
Treasurer	833	530	-	-
Amvets	1000	-	-	-
<u>Town Hall Annex</u>				
School Committee	1820	250	1000	-
Family Service	588	-	-	-
Playground	896	-	-	Centraliza- tion of stores
Vet. Benefit	204	-	80 ^a	-
Highways	576	-	-	-
Public Welfare	869	-	-	-
Health	945	-	250 ^a	1000
Legion	1728	-	-	Additional storage
	<u>13,024^b</u>	<u>2760</u>	<u>1340</u>	<u>1825</u>

^a Consultants' estimate

SOURCE: Questionnaires and interviews

^b Excludes 900 square feet of basement space now used by Civil Defense but too substandard for office use without extensive renovation.

continued in use or a school auditorium would be used for town purposes. In the latter case, an additional 1,500 square feet would be desirable to provide for a room for public hearings.

The above space estimates are conservative. A more exacting study by architects in actually designing a new town hall is likely to demonstrate a need for a larger amount of space to meet future requirements.

Parking Provision and Requirements

The survey of departments now in the two town office buildings found that 55 spaces are needed for employee parking only, plus another 15 spaces for visitors to town offices. When expanded to meet the needs documented above, at least 95 spaces will be required (75 for employees and 20 for visitors).

The present grounds provide a maximum of 60 parking spaces, with total car storage often being less, depending upon the size and spacing of vehicles. In addition to present town office parking space needs, this area must also serve the Library (at least 25 spaces), the Municipal Light Department (12 spaces), and the Police Department (at least 8 spaces in addition to the existing off-street supply around the railroad station). Thus, the present demand is for 115 spaces, twice the available supply. Employees must therefore park on Moore and Pleasant Streets or arrange with the Police Department to park in metered zones.

No interim solution could hope to meet the total present parking requirements for the town buildings. To the extent that local business employees or commuters may be pre-empting any of these spaces, some

relief might be gained by issuing permits to those authorized to park there and in reserved areas on surrounding streets, and excluding all others except visitors to the various town buildings using specially-designated visitor parking areas.

Long-range solutions for the parking problem are described in other sections of this report, which suggest separate parking on other sites for the Library, Police and Municipal Light Departments and alternative methods of meeting the town office parking space requirements.

Conclusion

A number of proposals have been made in the past for providing additional office space for municipal purposes by utilizing the present auditorium, by adding a wing to the existing building, or by a combination of both. Such a solution can be justified only on the grounds of expediency, and in the long run might even prove to be more expensive than the construction of an entirely new building to house municipal offices and related activities. The following alternative solutions are presented at this time for consideration and comment.

1. A New Office Building on the Present Site

Either the three buildings now in use could be razed and a new Town Hall erected on the entire two-acre public site, or the old Town Hall could be retained and a new building erected in the area now occupied in part by the present Annex and Library.

A new building on the present Town Hall site would have the advantage that the present location is well accepted in the town and is convenient to both the public and town employees. The town offices could serve as a community symbol, giving prestige and viability to the commercial area nearby. Also, a new civic building could improve the visual form of the area by providing a strong and meaningful landmark.

The disadvantages of a new building on the present site are the limited size and considerable slope of the site and its location in

an area of heavy traffic; these impose restrictions on design and would involve a high cost for site work and parking facilities. Temporary location would also have to be found for the town offices while construction was under way.

If it were decided that the old Town Hall should be retained, because of its associations for the townspeople, it could presumably be adapted to some other uses such as the American Legion, senior citizens clubs, Boy Scouts or community meeting rooms. The major disadvantages of retaining the building are the high cost of making the necessary renovations and the fact that no more than 60 parking spaces could be attractively provided for on the balance of the site, necessitating an expensive two-level parking structure to meet the minimum requirements.

2. A New Town Center

The study of future needs for town office space and accessory parking indicates that the present site of less than two acres is not large enough to meet these requirements except through the construction of a two-level parking facility. Consideration has therefore been given to the possibility of developing an entirely new municipal office center on a site which would provide room for future expansion.

There are two sites which would meet the requirements—the Underwood estate and the Penny land. Both of these sites are centrally located and are adequate in size, but the latter is believed to be preferable not only because it is already owned by the town but because the Underwood property—should it become available for municipal use by gift or purchase—would lend itself admirably to development as a community park.

The Penny land, especially if supplemented by the acquisition of the adjoining lumber yard, gas station, and two residential structures, would provide an area of sufficient size to meet all possible needs. Its convenience to all parts of town; its relationship to the high school, the new library site, the recreational building and adjoining playfield and park; and suitable topographical and soil conditions, combine to make this site the strongest contender as a location for a new town office center. Building on a new site would permit the occupancy of existing office space until construction was completed, a further consideration being that the present Town Hall property would have a high sale value for apartment or business use.

III. C I V I L D E F E N S E

Location and Accessibility

Civil Defense headquarters should be as close as possible to those town offices which must be able to function during an emergency to provide for public health and safety. The present location in the Town Hall Annex meets this location requirement, although it is otherwise deficient.

Space Provision and Requirements

The present basement location is totally unprotected against fallout, a minimum requirement. Nine hundred square feet of floor space is available, but this is not fully used because of its inadequacy as a shelter. It is estimated that about 3,000 square feet of floor space would be needed for an effective emergency operating center in suitably protected quarters.

Conclusions

Suitable headquarters must be provided if Civil Defense is to have any possibility of functioning in a war emergency. Solutions to the problem are now being explored by town officials, but it is recommended that the possibilities described in the following police and fire sections should be given precedence over temporary expedients.

IV. POLICE DEPARTMENT

Location and Accessibility

The police headquarters on Concord Avenue in Belmont Center are close to the geographical center of the town, with good access to all sections of the community.

Space Provision and Requirements

The existing station is a brick and reinforced concrete framed structure, about 30 years old, and in good condition. The building appears adequate for the town's immediate needs and adaptable to such future changes as can be foreseen.

Garaging and Parking

Garaging and parking facilities are generally inadequate. The Department now has seven cars and an ambulance but the two-door garage can only hold the ambulance and two or, with considerable maneuvering, three cars. The remaining cars park in the small area at the west side of the building. Two spaces are available at the rear of the site for the private cars of off-duty officers, but there is no provision for visitor parking.

The garages are badly situated in the basement at the rear of the building, with ramped access down from the road between the station and the municipal light building. During the winter, the difficulties of clearing snow from the ramp and the area in the rear often require that the ambulance remain parked in the street, with the engine running, in order to be able to respond quickly to a call.

Conclusions

The station requires garaging for at least four automobiles and the ambulance. These facilities, especially in the case of the ambulance, should allow immediate egress in all weather and should be expandable in case this proves necessary in the future. Additional off-street parking space should be provided for 8 to 10 cars for the Police Department and another 8 to 10 cars for the Municipal Light Department.

The land immediately adjacent to the police station, at the junction of Concord Avenue and Pleasant Street, is at present vacant. Although the land falls off sharply from the street level, it could provide adequate space for the required parking and garaging facilities. One solution, which would require a minimum of expensive filling, would be to construct a garage to house the ambulance, and possibly one or two cars, in the small area on the west side of the building at the street level; construct a new ramp with minimum possible grade down to the approximate level of the present parking area behind the station, there developing a lot large enough to accommodate 20 cars, with sufficient additional area for piling snow. The present garage could then be continued as an auxiliary garage or converted for maintenance work or a Civil Defense headquarters. Such a development plan would minimize site development costs and enable preservation of existing trees on the Pleasant Street frontage. So long as the ambulance is housed at street level, weather conditions should not prove more than a passing nuisance to use of the lower parking area.

Another solution, currently being studied by town officials, would be to construct a fire station on the site, with foundations extending down to the present ground level. The street level police parking area could be enlarged on filled ground to extend between the police and fire stations. Additional parking would be provided at the present ground level, as proposed above, in the area remaining. A principal immediate advantage of this proposal is that civil defense headquarters could be built into the fill which would be the base for the fire station, giving it adequate fallout protection in a location which is very convenient to the present town offices.

V. FIRE DEPARTMENT

Location and Accessibility

With fire headquarters near the geographic center of the town, and two stations in the principal high hazard areas, the general location and distribution of stations appear to be satisfactory, especially in view of the mutual aid system shared with the surrounding towns. Accessibility is generally good except at the headquarters, where the difficulty encountered in maneuvering large equipment into the busy commercial street slows down response and constitutes a hazard to both the public and the equipment.

Space Provision and Requirements

In order to meet National Fire Protection Association requirements for a town the size of Belmont, there should be an additional ladder company, preferably located at Waverley, and an additional engine company, preferably located at the headquarters.

The space provisions at Waverley and Harvard Lawn appear to be satisfactory for present and foreseeable demands (a reserve ladder truck is already stored at Waverley and accommodations are available for the men of an additional ladder company). The Leonard Street headquarters, however, are inadequate to meet even present requirements. The garage is of insufficient capacity for the increased size of modern equipment; also there is no space for cleaning or maintenance of equipment. In the dormitory section, toilet and locker facilities are inadequate and separate officers quarters are needed. The fire alarm room also should be more effectively

isolated from the main building structure. No station has a large enough site for satisfactory drill and pump work.

Adequacy of Total Fire Fighting Facilities

Requirements for fire stations should be considered in the context of total fire-fighting facilities provided by the town. The adequacy of these facilities is reflected in a rating which is given to each city and town in the United States, after a thorough survey, by the National Board of Fire Underwriters on behalf of insurance companies. The ratings are used to set basic fire insurance rates in each city and town.

Investigations are made on such items as water supply, fire alarm and fire prevention systems, and structural conditions, and also on the organization and equipment of the Fire Department. Deficiency points are awarded to each relevant item to the extent it is judged to fall below a nationally-applied standard. The present rating of Belmont is 4B (with a total of 1596 deficiency points) which was awarded after a survey conducted in 1933. By comparison, Arlington and Watertown have ratings of 3B and Waltham 4B, based on surveys made in 1961 and 1962.

Conclusions.

While Belmont has had much growth since its survey was made, there have been considerable improvements in the town's fire fighting facilities, particularly in the fields of water supply, fire prevention and fire alarm. The present equipment is in good condition. Therefore it would be advisable to have a new survey made, as it is unlikely that the town would now have

more deficiency points than it did in 1933. Considering that in 1933 the town was awarded just slightly over the number of deficiency points associated with the rating of 3 (1500 points), it seems more likely that subsequent improvements would have exceeded town growth sufficiently to qualify for a better rating. This would reflect standards comparable to those of Arlington and Watertown and would result in a decrease in insurance rates on all class-rated properties throughout the town. Even if the rating remained unchanged, the town would have the benefit of a thorough assessment of present facilities and a sound basis for planning future fire protection improvements.

A new fire department headquarters station is immediately desirable as the existing station is not adaptable to expansion. The new station would have to be located in the same general area near the center of the town, with ready access to Belmont Hill and the northern part of the community. It should have access to main traffic arteries and be so located as not to affect adjacent properties adversely. Adequate land for drill and pump work should also be provided, although this could be separate from the central fire station.

Of the possible sites investigated, three appear feasible. The first is on the north side of Concord Avenue, either on the Penny land or on the site of the present lumber yard. Either site would have sufficient land for a large enough station for present and future needs plus off-street parking, drill tower, and practice areas; and it could be designed as an integral part of a new town center complex, should the municipal

office building be constructed at this location. A wide break in the divider strip would be necessary for access eastbound onto Concord Avenue and special traffic signals would probably be necessary to halt traffic as equipment leaves the station. There would be some disadvantage in having the station so close to the new library across the street, and it would be slightly over the National Board of Fire Underwriters prescribed one and one-half mile maximum running distance to the farthest developed areas on Belmont Hill.

Another solution, which has some interesting possibilities, would be to burrow into the foot of Belmont Hill on Pleasant Street north of the Clark Street railroad overpass. This central location has the advantage of maximum accessibility, and it would have no adverse effect on adjacent properties. If desired the station could be designed in such a way that it was protected against fallout, in which case it would be an ideal location for civil defense headquarters and might then be eligible for federal financial assistance. Such a solution would require the widening of Pleasant Street and the Clark Street overpass, which would be desirable under any circumstances, and a separate drill ground and tower would probably have to be developed at Clay Pit Pond.

The third site would be on filled land immediately adjacent to the police station, as described in the previous section. This has the advantage of simultaneously serving both fire and civil defense needs. It is also a good central location for the fire station in terms of distance from various parts of the town. However, as in the previous

possibility, widening of Pleasant Street is basic to the feasibility of the site and special traffic signals would be necessary to enable the Fire Department to regulate traffic at the intersection when making an emergency run. The site has some disadvantages in terms of access to the most densely developed areas of the town, which generate the greatest numbers of emergencies, because the run down the Concord Avenue hill and the turn under the railroad would be awkward and dangerous for large fire-fighting vehicles unless the traffic circulation system there can be adequately redesigned and rebuilt. The site is also small and would necessitate separate training facilities elsewhere.

Other sites considered were: Concord Avenue Park adjacent to a possible Alexander Avenue underpass beneath the railroad (too distant from Belmont Hill, egress through residential streets, unlikelihood of underpass); west side of Claflin Street facing Channing Road (necessitates buying three houses, site too small, traffic control too difficult); municipal parking lot facing Cross Street (reduces parking supply, site too small, traffic control too difficult); and between Royal Road and the railroad facing Common Street (likely to be adversely affected by future Concord Avenue-Common Street traffic solution, site very narrow, houses too nearby).

VI. WATER DEPARTMENT

Location and Accessibility

The Water Department's location on Waverley Street, a main collector street, has good vehicular access from all parts of town except for those dependent on public transportation. The surrounding area is essentially residential.

Space Provision and Requirements

The present accommodation is poor and insufficient. The building is a 50-year-old wood-framed structure constructed originally as a dwelling and attached stable. It is considerably below acceptable standards and is an unsafe repository for valuable records.

After repeated requests from the Department for better facilities, the town acquired land adjoining the Highway Department garages and authorized preparation of architects' plans for new offices and garages. The plans call for approximately 6,000 square feet of office, meter repair and storage space, and 5,400 square feet of garage space. Money for construction has not been approved; Department officials indicate the delay has been due to pending consideration of a Department of Public Works which would incorporate the Water Department and include its office space in the town offices with other public works offices.

Garaging and Parking

Present garage facilities are wholly inadequate. Of the twelve trucks and two cars operated by the Department, there is sufficient garage space

in the wooden structure for only six trucks, and this with considerable maneuvering. Lack of space has prevented the acquisition of additional needed equipment. On-site parking spaces are sufficient only for the staff; visitors must park in the street nearby, causing frequent complaints from neighboring residents.

Conclusions

The previously-acquired land adjacent to the Highway Department garages is a suitable location for Water Department garages and shops and these should be constructed at the earliest possible date. The present buildings and land could be sold for clearance and construction of new houses.

The Water Department feels strongly that it would facilitate the operations of the Department, including the keeping of records, if its offices were located with its garage and shops. However, if a new municipal building were to be constructed, consideration should be given to the advantages of having all town offices in one location in order to provide for the maximum co-ordination of municipal activities and for ready access to the public at large.

VII. MUNICIPAL LIGHT DEPARTMENT

The main distribution station of the Municipal Light Department, in the basement of the Department headquarters on Concord Avenue, and a unit sub-station on adjacent land are well sited at the center of a system of cables radiating out to all sections of the town. The office space is adequate for the foreseeable future. The building appears to be structurally sound and in good condition. The only major problem is the lack of off-street parking, as six to eight cars are brought to work daily and four cars are operated by the Department.

Parking space might be provided in conjunction with either the new Police Department parking facilities recommended above or the redevelopment of the town hall site across the street.

The only other additional land needs might be for sub-stations to augment the present main station but their space requirements are small and their location demands flexible.

VIII. C E M E T E R Y

The Belmont cemetery on the eastern boundary of the town has enough land, including a recently acquired section, to meet estimated needs for about thirteen more years. The cemetery administrative and service facilities, however, appear adequate for a considerable period.

In order to take advantage of the existing service facilities, additional land should be provided nearby. Acquisition of vacant land in Cambridge adjacent to the recently acquired portion should serve the town's needs at least until 1980. While this land will require expensive filling and grading, as has the recently acquired land, it is a logical extension of the present cemetery and would be a good use of otherwise marginal and unattractive land.

IX. TOWN GARAGES

The town garages adjacent to the railroad tracks off Waverley Street are used by the Municipal Light and Highway Departments.

While the buildings are in satisfactory condition they are not large enough to house new and larger types of equipment, and this has precluded the purchase of special equipment which would in the long run have been more economical for the town. Additional space with larger stalls should be provided as soon as possible.

X. HOUSING AUTHORITY

The offices of the Housing Authority on Pearson Street are conveniently situated at the veterans housing project. The accommodation appears sufficient and satisfactory both for the present and future considering that increases, if any, in the amount of public housing are likely to be small.

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