

Town of Belmont Economic Development Committee (EDC) Meeting Minutes

Date: Thursday, June 1, 2023

Meeting Type: Hybrid

DATE: June 30, 2023

TIME: 10:19 AM

Attendees

- In person: Paul Joy (meeting lead), Katherine Venzke, Erin Brown, Deran Muckjian (arrived late), Gabe Distler (Town staff)
- Virtual: Jack Sy, Marie Warner
- Absent: Wendy Etkind, Emma Thurston, Renee Ruiguo

1. EDC Meeting Called to Order 7:13 PM (had to wait for quorum)

2. Approval of May 11, 2023 Meeting Minutes

Group review of notes. Katherine V. motion to approve, Marie W. seconded. Unanimous approval of May 11th meeting minutes.

3. Committee Member Recruitment Update

Paul Joy provided update: We have two (2) people currently slotted as likely committee members and there are ongoing discussions happening with others as potential candidates.

Discussion continued about whether anyone has applied via the Town of Belmont portal? Gabe Distler explained portal process and complications but said he will check on this via Town staff and report back to group once he has clarification.

Katherine V. suggested that we communicate proactively to local businesses that we are looking for committee members. She suggested this be pitched as an opportunity to be in a leadership position and to have a voice with regards to change. She also emphasized that we make the level of commitment (meetings and time required) clear to all potential candidates.

Conversation continued about an earlier economic development-focused group in Belmont that was mostly made up of residents but was dissolved by the Select Board with a goal of moving committee make-up from mostly residents to more business owners.

Paul wrapped conversation by stating that we have strong applicants though confirmations are taking more time than expected. He reiterated that getting word about committee slots out to business owners would be helpful.

**Note: During the above discussion, the committee meeting was temporarily halted at 7:25 because member Jack Sy dropped off from video conference due to tech issues. We did not have a quorum during that time. Sy joined again and the group came out of recess at 7:29pm.*

4. Zoning Bylaw Review: Belmont Restaurants

Committee members embarked on a long presentation and discussion around zoning bylaws for restaurants in Belmont. Paul Joy presented a slide deck (*see attached slides that were presented during meeting*) and discussion happened throughout presentation.

Slide/Question 1 – refer to slide for full details.

Paul J. read through question asked of restaurant owners, as well as data responses and comments. Of the 6 responses, 1 person said their experience opening in Belmont was POOR, 2 others were median, and 1 person said they had a positive experience.

Paul explained that there were 6 responses to the overall survey, out of ~40 restaurants that exist in Belmont.

Slide/Question 2 – refer to slide for full details.

Paul J. read through question about Town government support of restaurant opening process and read through data responses and comments.

6 responses.

The consensus based on data is that respondents thought Town staff had good intentions but didn't always have the correct answers to their questions; process seems unnecessarily difficult.

Katherine V. and Marie W. surmised from the data that lack of knowledge, confusion about process, and bureaucracy gets in the way of progress as businesses are trying to set up in Belmont.

Slide/Question 3 – refer to slide for full details.

Paul J. read through question on how long it had taken business owners to open restaurants in Belmont; Paul read through data responses and comments.

6 responses. Timeframe for opening a restaurant based on responses = 50% of respondents said 6-12 months, 33.3% said more than 12 months.

As comparison, Marie W. looked up general timeframe for opening a restaurant in other areas and it showed 4-6 months.

Discussion ensued on building inspections, alcohol licensing and timelines.

Jack Sy: Permitting and inspections are one part of the process, but the planning part is difficult in that it's hard to understand what you can and cannot do as a business owner. He said he spoke with an area business owner who said it will take him 3-4 months just to get through permitting process.

Discussion on how waiting on committee meetings to move things forward might hinder the timeline, as well. Jack S. mentioned that getting through the ZBA meeting process takes a lot of time.

Slide/Question 4 – refer to slide for full details.

Paul J. read through question, results, and summarizes quotes/comments.

6 responses.

Paul J. said comments show that there are some pro-business people in Belmont who help move things along but some things are still archaic.

Katherine V. mentioned efforts in Lexington to get people to shop local, and how much time and money goes into that effort, even though it doesn't always pan out.

Jack S. said people need to shop local, it really makes a difference.

Slide/Question 5 – refer to slide for full details.

Paul J. read through question, results, and summarizes quotes/comments.

6 responses.

Katherine V. notes interesting comment about town pride and how, as someone who does not live in Belmont, thinks that Belmont DOES have town pride – but it doesn't mean that this translates to local shopping. Aligning and emphasizing the connection between residents and the town could help boost local engagement.

Slide/Question 6 – refer to slide for full details.

Paul J. read through question, results, and summarizes quotes/comments.

6 responses.

Paul J. mentioned that respondents were only allowed to choose one option when answering.

Marie W. comments that she's heard of a direct link between rising rents and the proliferation of banks in Belmont Center, as banks are an industry that can afford to pay high rents. Deran M. agrees with this.

Paul J. notes that business owners are dealing with higher rents and expenses, but also intangibles like labor and costs.

Discussion on this question ended with clarification of response pie chart; Katherine V. noted that as a business owner, it would be difficult to pick just one of the options asked in Question 6.

Paul highlights the three options that were not chosen at all by respondents: competition, sign restrictions, and parking.

**Note: Daren Muckjian joins meeting in-person at 7:52pm after attending another meeting.*

Slide/Question 7 – refer to slide for full details.

Paul J. read through question, results, and summarizes quotes/comments.

6 responses.

Paul said he did not edit any of the extensive comments that were provided.

Katherine: do we ask them to post in newspaper?

Gabe: yes, zoning board lists in Boston Globe or Belmontonian.

Slide/Question 8 – refer to slide for full details.

Paul J. read through question, results, and summarizes quotes/comments.

6 responses.

Deran M. asked who the restaurant respondents are? Paul J. said he doesn't want to identify them but confirms that respondent restaurants are distributed throughout Belmont and are not located in just one center or business area.

Slide/Question 9 – missing slide. Paul confirms this was a slide numbering mistake.

Slide/Question 10 – refer to slide for full details.

Paul J. read through question, results, and summarizes quotes/comments.

6 responses.

Brief discussion on parking responses, and Paul J. noted that parking will be the subject of a longer discussion at next EDC meeting on June 15th.

Slide/Question 11 – refer to slide for full details.

Paul J. read through question, results, and summarizes quotes/comments.

6 responses, no comments.

Paul J. explains how comparisons are shown on the slide (bar chart comparing Belmont to nearby towns).

Katherine V. said there is some value in overall comparison because if respondents run businesses in other towns as well, then they can help to identify problem points in Belmont. Deran M. agreed.

Slide/Question 12 – refer to slide for full details.

Paul J. read through question, results, and summarizes quotes/comments.

6 responses.

NPS [Net Promoter Score] question.

Paul J. said the way to think about these responses is that “9s” and “10s” are your supporters, and anyone who answered “0-6” are your detractors that you need to subtract from your overall number. And “7s” and “8s” are your passives.

He states that based on survey responses, Belmont has a score of -50%.

Committee response:

Paul J. – I don’t know how this compares with other towns but this is a difficult result to think about.

Katherine V. – There’s no Chamber of Commerce or recruitment entity to get the word out.

Deran M. – ...other than the landlords.

Katherine V. – And if the landlords suggest that potential tenants talk to existing ones, then responses won’t be positive.

Marie W. – I would anticipate some distractors.

Paul J. – You really do want to be able to get some “9s” and “10s.”

Marie W. – We’re also only dealing with sample size of 6 responses.

— End of slide deck with survey responses —

— Paul J. moves to zoning-specific slides —

(Refer to this set of slides for specific details)

Slides show current zoning map in Belmont – including local business districts, general business, and parking lots — and classifications of different types of restaurants.

Group discussed specific zones for business districts: Belmont Center, Cushing Square, Waverley Square, and “Trapelo Corridor.”

Discussion on which restaurants fall into which categories; Paul J. explains that before you open, the Town must put your business into one of these categories and that can take a while. So, restaurants need to figure this out when heading into the process. Gabe D. adds that restaurants must provide a business plan.

More discussion on types of applications and special permits in Belmont.

Discussion on how categorization of restaurants then maps to the zones throughout Belmont. Paul J. says this starts getting into regulations, as well.

[Conversation includes how outdoor dining factors in vis-à-vis square footage, seating capacity, splits between indoor & outdoor seating, parking approvals and reapprovals.]

Paul J. notes: once you know how you are defined by Belmont, and you determine where your restaurant will be, then special permits will be defined.

THIS IS WHERE OUR COMMITTEE MAY BE ABLE TO PUSH FOR FUTURE CHANGE.

Group: What are the questions we need to be asking? For example, can categories like “take out” and “fast food” be merged to simplify the process for new businesses?

Paul J. then outlines the multiple steps in the permitting process via slides, includes outline of how Restaurant Review “committee” (not a public committee / more of a Town staff group) works ... then restaurants must move on to ZBA approval.

Additional committee review could include Community Development, Board of Health, Fire Department, Water Department, Plumbing Inspector, Electrical.

Discussion on clarification of when ZBA is required, what hurdles business owners might face.

Gabe D. notes the ZBA’s role of why they are involved is people’s concern about parking and any possible disruptions to the neighborhood. ZBA meetings often involve residents with questions.

Paul confirms that all of this information is included in the current Bylaw.

Paul J. finishes slides that outlines remaining steps that business owners must go through (*refer to slides*).

Discussion on grease traps and Belmont’s specific requirements around these.

Reform access slide: per Paul J., ANOTHER POSSIBLE AREA OF FOCUS FOR OUR COMMITTEE.

Committee discussion on this continues briefly about necessary approvals at Town Meeting, and possibly setting up an online permitting and approvals process for businesses (this was suggested by Katherine V., Arlington has done this). It makes staff accountable for things that are being held up in process, and also offers transparency to the businesses that are trying to open.

Final note: Katherine V. also advocates for providing recommendations on environmental considerations with Belmont restaurants, saying that other communities have been moving in this direction wrt take out packaging and recycling. Katherine suggests that Belmont could become a town known for such environmental efforts, and it could help increase business.

@8:50pm – Paul opens meeting for public comments.

One member of the public has joined (virtual): Doug Kaplow, Belmont resident.

Doug is also a member of the Cushing Square Neighborhood Association.

Doug comments:

Belmont merchants have been pushed to think about sustainable options.

In terms of the issues you discussed today, I’m impressed.

I’m concerned about small sample size of the restaurant survey, and if they have a bias based on where in town they are located.

Expanding the survey could lead to a more accurate interpretation of results.

I'm a big fan of automating some of the [permitting and approvals] process, and there are sophisticated online systems out there that track complex processes. Could be for broader use across business, not just for restaurants, even if Belmont needs to invest and approve over the next few years.

Re: grease traps: I think innovation in this area is good.

I question why there is concern about having more residents on the committee, as they are the ones who feel the effects of things that go wrong.

This was a ton of work and I appreciate what you've done.

We do have empty storefronts and rising rents; did you get any indication that we're getting control of storefronts? This is something to be tracking for the town. It would be concerning if 60-70% of commercial space in town is controlled by 10 people or less.

Group discussion on this.

5. Zoning Bylaw Review Next Meeting: Commercial Parking Minimums

Paul Joy previewed our next zoning bylaw discussion on parking, which will be held at the June 15th Economic Development meeting. In addition to discussion related to Belmont Zoning Board of Appeals, he also plans to compare Belmont's situation with other communities in the region.

6. Communications Lead Update

No new updates from Communications.

7. Updates on Other Committees

Paul Joy and Gabe Distler on MBTA Committee: There will be a public engagement forum at Beech Street Center on June 21st. They are encouraging as many people as possible to attend. Gabe will share flyer for this event with the group.

Paul Joy on Vision 21 Committee: Taylor Yates of V21 is doing a fair amount of work on ZBA and bylaws, as well, and is interested in a joint meeting with the EDC on June 28th. At that meeting, we can discuss hotels, restaurants, and (possibly) signage and parking. At that meeting, there will be a vote on recommendations to be made to the Planning and Select boards about zoning specifics.

8. Current State of Business in Belmont

Deran M. said he reached out to owner of 60 Leonard Street, where the CVS had been located, to get an update on plans for the building and to ask the owner to maintain the building better during the transition. Deran hasn't heard back yet.

Discussion on withdrawal of application at 147-151 Belmont Street.

Katherine V. mentioned that new shop Belmont Wine and Beer, at 32 Leonard Street in Belmont Center, is now open. Katherine has encouraged the owner to join the BCBA [Belmont Center Business Association]. There was a brief discussion on how CVS moving from that side of the street has impacted neighboring businesses, less foot traffic from folks who would stop into shops before/after CVS visits.

Deran M. confirmed that Gerry Dickhaut, owner of Champions Sporting Goods at 53 Leonard Street, is retiring at the end of this year. He mentioned there is possible interest by two Belmont residents in taking over the space, but he said the landlord will need to be flexible wrt rent.

Marie W. asked if there is confirmation of the rumor that Winter's Hardware in Cushing Square is closing? No one had any updates on this. Paul Joy mentioned a new barber shop that has opened on Trapelo Rd. and that it seemed busy the last time he stopped in.

9. Public Comment

No public comments.

10. Adjourn

Motion to adjourn by Katherine V., seconded by Deran M. Meeting adjourned at 9:19pm.

Next two EDC meetings: June 15th at 7:00pm; June 28th at 7:00pm.

[end of meeting minutes]