



Town of Belmont

Development Focus Group
January 19, 2024

Meeting Notes

Meeting Attendees

- Sharone Small, Metro West Community Development, Director of Real Estate, non-profit that builds affordable housing
- Alisa Gardner-Todreas, Metro West Community Development, Chief Operating Officer, Belmont resident
- Carl Solander, Belmont resident, architect, co-chair Historic District Commission, land management committee (manages Lone Tree Hill), architect at Reverse architecture
- Andrew Consigli, Civico Development, multifamily housing development
- Dan Gainsboro, Now Communities, developer of Concord Riverwalk
- Bob DiMatteo, mostly single family home developer, new urbanism, first project in state under 3A going in Lexington, lived in Belmont about 10 years
- Jack (John) Dawley, Northland Residential, residential developer
- Chris Ryan, Director of Planning & Building
- Josh Fiala, MAPC
- Sarah Scott, MAPC

Chris Ryan provided a welcome and introduction to the group. The group went through a round of introductions. MAPC provided a brief introductory presentation to set the context for the discussion.

Question prompts for discussion:

- Do you have any observations or feedback about the current approach?
- What types of housing opportunities do you see as most attractive in the Belmont housing market?
- Do you have thoughts about specific housing types or dimensional characteristics that are desirable, or issues to avoid?
- Do you have feedback as to language or requirements to include or avoid in Belmont's 3A zoning?
- Do you have thoughts about parking requirements?
- Do you have thoughts about the level of affordability required?

The following comments were made by meeting attendees during the discussion:

- Myth busting is important. MBTA community is an incredible opportunity to make our Town's more beautiful – one can drive around and see where aesthetic and functional improvements can be made. People realize this is an opportunity.
- Focus on missing middle housing, with two town centers in Belmont it could go a long way. Subzone 4 with small scale mixed-use could be a good opportunity, interest in Mandatory Mixed-use.
- Mandatory mixed-use could present issues. Concerns expressed to not use mandatory mixed-use. It could be problematic with the potential to lose existing commercial areas.
- Mixed-use challenges include the cost of construction with retail or even ground story parking is a challenge. Filling spaces with retail tenants, underwriting and financing are all challenging for mixed-use. These are all challenging, developers have not found a solution to it. Retail problem and ground floor problem in addition to a housing problem. Particularly with requirements in an existing commercial area – always think about how to be creative with those spaces, such as using live/work to make street activating uses. Flexible strategies to use that don't make mandatory mixed-use as difficult.
- Is mandatory a good idea or a bad idea? Don't like notion of mandatory for reasons outlined. It is a math game, at end of day relatively simple arithmetic, math must work if housing is going to work. Mandatory mixed-use must be evaluated by economics, how does it all intertwine with economics of the deal. Be cautious going down the mandatory route. For example, in a building 70-90 units above, some form of non-residential ground floor, been here seven years, only in last year have all spaces been filled with tenants. Four of the tenants are some form of health club, taken a while to find tenants for the retail spaces.
- Can you create an incentive to go up in height to preserve/allow ground story uses that are important to the community; is the goal to satisfy 3A or generate additional housing units ("beds for heads"); 0 or 0.25 minimum parking for subdistricts closer to transit; parking is a math game too in terms of site layout, unit mix, etc.; more flexibility in parking embedded in the zoning; generally wants to sell units to people with cars because it broadens their market; affordability is part of the math, makes deals challenging to finance (cash flow); need affordable housing, but strict thresholds can be a challenge.
- Concern that we're going to lose commercial space, single strip commercial, why not put one or two stories above it. It is an option and is a push and pull between rezoning for MBTA and providing incentives to keep the use.
- Concern about overregulation or mandatory regulation, Town decided should be an affordable component for residential and retail. Did create some challenges or contributed to challenges. For finding the tenants and impacting the math. Cost of building things and complexity. Asking questions and getting feedback. Be careful of unintended consequences when you start to put some of these into the regulations.
- Communities that are flexible about providing affordability (i.e., how much affordability, in-lieu payments) are helpful; flexibility about ground stories is good too (not just retail, "active use," building amenity); less mandatory and more about what works for a particular site and particular development.

- Star Market could be 6th zone where you preserve – can floors be added to create an incentive to go up to preserve the resource of a supermarket? Arithmetic allows for preservation of a really good credit tenant with dense housing and affordability above it. Incent how to make that arithmetic work where that retail component is preserved. Other retail along Trapelo Road that may be obsolete, don't need to be preserved in real estate judgement – how to preserve key retail resources. Goal with 3A, check the box create zoning, with nothing ever built, or goal to create beds for heads – push/pull paradox going on in towns. Hopefully to create beds for heads.
- Parking – parking requirements could be zero or 0.25. As opposed to 0.5. Parking is a math game and a planning game. How are we going to park the development. The challenge is always how to park it? More flexibility in parking. Affordability is part of the math, part of the arithmetic, makes deals challenging to finance, cash flow, need affordable housing. Hard thresholds.
- Retail (or street activated use, apartment amenity that attracts retail in the future, more flexibility written into the regs for the particular site or development) or affordable housing requirement – more flexibility (in lieu payments or how much affordability). More mandatory gets used the harder it is to make any of the math work.
- Best projects are those that begin with a partnership, a collaboration, with Town's. It is an incredibly complicated business. Mandatory and regulatory understand why it needs to be there but gets in the way of good projects. If you really want to achieve these things, figure out what they are. Achieve the result with a partnership with developers. No axe to grind other to contribute to good projects.
- Affordable rental housing – units up to 60% AMI up to 30% AMI. Use low-income housing tax credits and other subsidies. Any project like that needs to have at least 40 homes on one site or right next to each other to make affordable rent housing financially feasible. Hard to attract.
- Affordability incentives for parcels that can handle larger buildings with higher unit counts; incentives give the town the opportunity to encourage development in the direction that they want to see it going without mandates; mandatory mixed-use could suck away commercial properties from other parts of town, need to think about impact on surrounding areas that aren't part of the new zoning.
- Incentives for historic properties – affordability incentives for parcels that can encourage affordability to meet 10% in the Town. Use incentives, not mandatory requirements, impact on surrounding areas that aren't part of the new zoning.
- Flex space on the ground story is probably a good solution.
- Inclusionary bylaw based on special permit, would eliminate special permit. Then do financial feasibility analysis. Continuing tension going forward.

- Parking – folks who are against it are the loudest – have to think about reducing parking and car use from environmental perspective – discourage car use, and encourage development.
- Supports reducing parking requirements because it supports environmental goals of legislation; as a Town Meeting member, thinks that there could be community support for lower parking minimums.
- Less about discouraging car use and more about encourage other modes of travel, multimodal, and active transit.
- Concord Riverwalk and Mill Run in Concord were about 12-14 years apart. Riverwalk was 13 homes with 3 bedrooms and 2 bedrooms with about 27 parking spaces. When first sold, about half of the residents had one car per household. It is about $\frac{3}{4}$ mile walk to the commuter rail. Mill Run is 14 homes with about 24 parking spaces and some visitor spaces, some spaces are tandem in front of garages. Somewhat self-selecting for buyers, but more than what is being contemplated. People sort it out. People appreciate it not being a sea of asphalt. About 60% less paving used with reduced parking requirements. Emergency response people's concerns, learn to work with it. Not the way we used to do it. Need to think about these as 50 – 100-year decisions. In the future, there will be less reliance on autos and suburban infill.