

Town of Belmont, Massachusetts
MBTA COMMUNITIES ADVISORY COMMITTEE

PUBLIC FORUM
MEETING MINUTES

February 15, 2024

RECEIVED
TOWN CLERK
BELMONT, MA

DATE: March 4, 2024
TIME: 9:00 AM

Present: Thayer Donham, Roy Epstein, Rachel Heller, Paul Joy, Patrick Murphy, Drew Nealon, Julie Wu

Town Staff: Christopher Ryan

MAPC: Josh Fiala, Sarah Scott

The meeting was called to order at 7:05 pm. The meeting was held virtually via Zoom and in person at the Beech Street Center.

Roy Epstein gave an overview of the process and indicated that there are 4 maps for the public to review. The committee is working toward bringing one map and the zoning to town meeting in September.

Rachel Heller emphasized that there is important work to do and all town residents are welcome to craft the final proposal. She indicated that the challenge is how to allow for growth and maintain our community character. The Town has just adopted the Housing Production Plan (HPP) and it documents the housing needs of the town. For example, one needs an income of 200k to buy condo and over \$300k to buy a single family home but median income in town is below those numbers. The HPP also showed that a variety of kinds of housing options including those built to address accessibility needs are needed in the town.

The committee started with the HPP because it provided maps of potential housing development sites and then identified other underutilized sites to develop a framework for the 3A zoning maps. The committee appreciates the meeting attendees participating in the process and as a group we all can be part of the solution to complying with the new law.

Josh Fiala introduced himself and Sarah Scott from MAPC and said that another MAPC person was on-line to manage the on-line survey process.

Josh Fiala began by stating that the 3A law is about housing production. He will run through the process of how we got here and that the last half of the meeting is about reviewing the maps and providing feedback. He wants folks to feel like they have participated and looks forward to getting their comments.

He clarified that this meeting is not about whether Belmont should comply with the law or whether we should drop some of the rules of compliance. The purpose of the meeting is to narrow from four options to one option and then focus in on the details of zoning itself. The timeline is to bring the map and zoning to the Planning Board by April 1st so they can start a public hearing process.

Josh reported that the law allows multi-family zoning by right. Zoning is a framework for future investments. It does not change the current rules but allows more development options to happen by right. He then showed examples of existing buildings in Belmont that are built at a higher density than what the 3A law requires. Josh then reviewed the sub-district characteristics including when special permits might be required.

He gave an overview of the process whereby five options were narrowed to three options and then Roy Epstein added one more option that reflects the most recent conversations with the committee and the public.

Josh also reviewed the goals and principles that the committee has used in creating the maps and locating the zoning districts.

Josh emphasized that all three options are compliant with the 3A regulations and the same variables apply on all three so that the compliance model can provide comparable results.

Josh described the options and the intent. They tried to step down to residential neighborhoods, so that as one moves out from the commercial centers the zoning goes to a lower density residential zoning. He observed that most of the properties have homes already so the vacant sites might utilize the zoning. They tried to fit with surrounding neighborhood characteristics.

Tomi Olsen asked Josh to please describe the various districts and point to them because the graphics still difficult to see.

Thayer Donham overheard participant say that the audience need handouts that describe the sub-district characteristics to cross-reference while discussing the maps.

Josh also reported that in response to a request from the Belmont Housing Trust his team reviewed the SHI and provided an estimate of the affordable units that could hypothetically be developed using the town's current inclusionary zoning regulations.

Option 1 and Option 3 are similar. The Waverley area map meets the requirements of 3A in Option 1. Option 3 distributes the units around Belmont.

Josh explained that the team was working to get numbers down closer to 1,632 and that the numbers do need to be higher than the requirement because it is easier to subtract than to add units. The team wanted to confirm that we have looked at everything and then strategically reduce the number of units. We also need to submit a final number of units with a buffer for EOHLC review because they may remove parcels during their approval.

PUBLIC QUESTIONS

Ms. Fonseca remarked that Roy Epstein has developed a zoning option that he should discuss. She suggested that the zoning process should include a financial analysis and an urban design plan.

Roy Epstein responded that he came up with an alternative based on reaction to all scenarios. He believes that the option has 1,632 units plus a buffer of 12%. There will be an economic impact study by Planning Board. This committee is providing information to the Planning Board.

Chris Ryan reported that he is working on getting funding for a Town-wide economic impact study that will include the 3A zoning.

Ira Morgenstern said he is struggling with the impact on the commercial areas. The town has 95% residential and 5% commercial. Most towns stimulate commercial development. Given override, how can the town prevent future multi-story commercial from being crowded out. Josh Fiala responded that Option 2 stays out of other commercial areas. Roy Epstein asked to record that point about commercial tax base and move on to the open public feedback section of the meeting.

Judith Ananian Sarno stated that Option 1 is not the option the committee came up with. She wondered how South Pleasant got back on map since the committee had already voted to remove it? Chris Ryan indicated that he had told MAPC to put it back in since he had heard from the development community that someone might be interested in developing housing along that street. He emphasized that it was a staff recommendation and did not come from the committee.

Linda Cunningham asked why the zoning had to focus on the two transit hubs rather than the bus routes that are heavily used. Roy Epstein responded that the rules as they apply to Belmont means that Belmont is a commuter rail community and we have to create the zoning in proximity to train stations not bus stations.

Julie Feins thanked MAPC for calculating the SHI numbers. She was surprised they are not higher. Josh Fiala stated that their calculations are conservative and likely would be better.

Josh Fiala asked the attendees to go to easels to write down their comments and vote on options. Via Zoom there is also a link to provide feedback.

The next meeting is on Feb. 29th in a Hybrid format. The purpose of the meeting is to select a single option to proceed.

At 8:10 the formal meeting ended.

The minutes were recorded by Thayer Donham.