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BELMONT COMMERCIAL AREAS STUDY

RECONNAISSANCE REPORT

FEBRUARY 10, 1986

Connery Associates

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Prepared for the Town of Belmont, Massachusetts

BOARD OF SELECTMEN

by

CONNERY ASSOCIATES
and ROLF GOETZE

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BELMONT COMMERCIAL AREAS STUDY

INTRODUCTION AND OVERVIEW

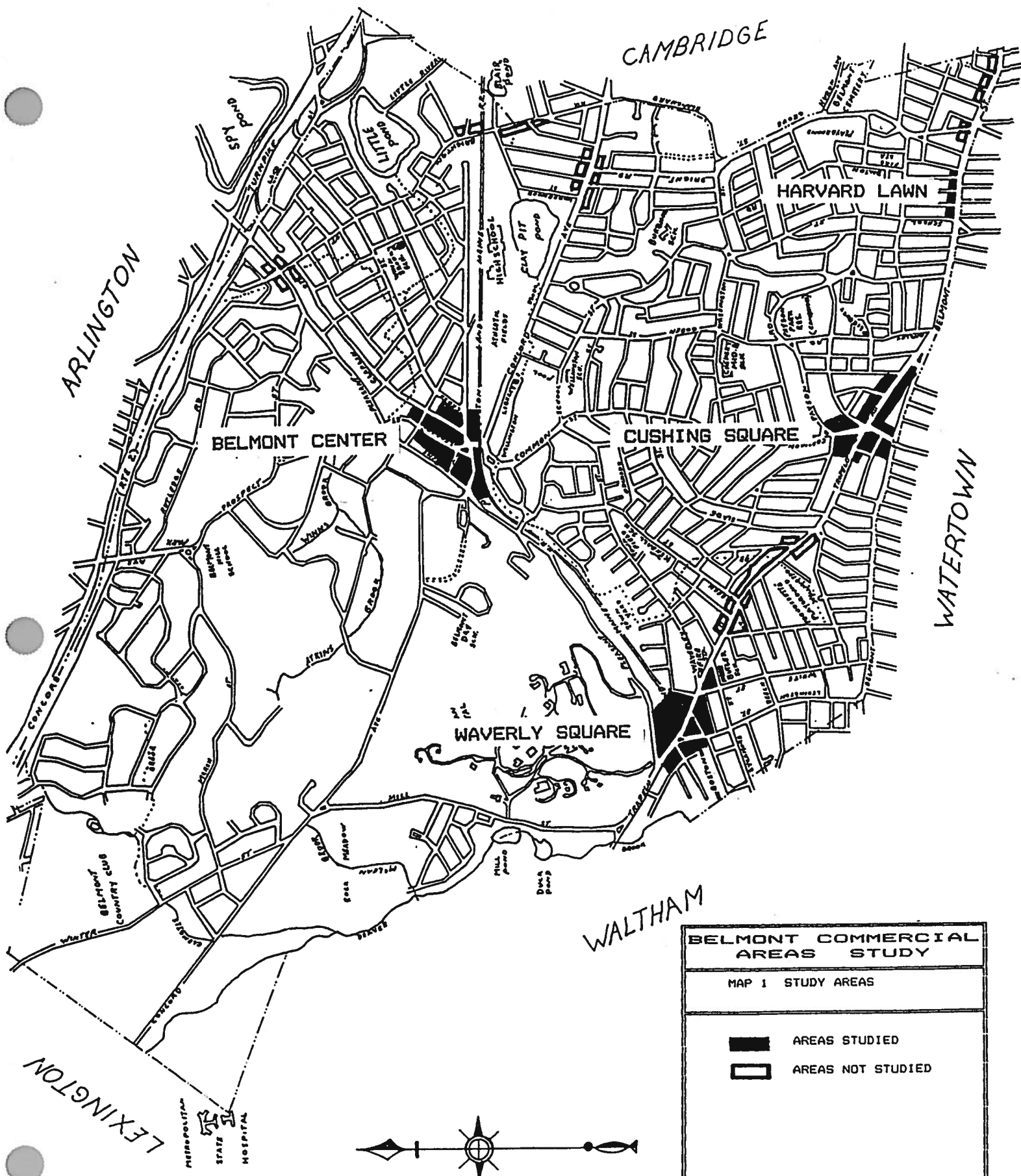
Commercial areas act as "show windows" of any town, to residents as well as visitors. However, in Belmont, in contrast with its High School and Library, many aspects of the Town's business areas reflect poorly upon the quality of the residential areas.




And if these "show windows" are not soon improved, then Belmont's past trend of stable, rising appreciation in residential values will diminish. Rather than simply reacting to growing development pressures, Belmont must begin to plan to accommodate the future, and restructure its town government and development regulations to enable the Town to anticipate and guide change.

The robust health of the regional economy, the maturing and rising well-being of the population, as well as increased car ownership and the completion of the nearby Alewife rapid transit station, all constitute forces now profoundly altering Belmont through the changing living patterns and needs of its residents. Properly guided, however, they also provide major opportunities to enhance the Town.

The economic potential of the commercial areas is strong, but along with the design and appearance issues, the Town must begin to address how to effectively modify traffic and parking patterns. For example, while the actual parking supply in all centers is basically sufficient, it is inefficiently utilized, causing the perception of parking problems and inadequate supply. Further, parking is not tailored to maximize customer access to the stores. The needs and amenities for pedestrians have long been neglected. Each center shows a clear bias in favor of automobile access to the detriment of the pedestrian.

The necessary Town planning capability will require time and effort to establish, raising the issue of costs. Since over 92 percent of Belmont's property values are residential, it would be unrealistic to expect increased tax revenues from commercial properties to fully meet the costs of the Town's need for sounder planning. However, adjoining suburbs like Arlington, Lexington and Winchester have already made such a planning commitment in their annual budgets -- and there is no doubt that sound planning in Belmont would similarly be an investment that will be amply repaid in terms of improved residential property values in coming years.



BELMONT COMMERCIAL AREAS STUDY	
MAP 1 STUDY AREAS	
	AREAS STUDIED
	AREAS NOT STUDIED
SCALE 0 500 1000 1500 2000 	
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THE CONTEXT OF THE COMMERCIAL AREAS

The four commercial areas studied in this report tend to complement rather than compete with one another.

Belmont Center, in addition to symbolizing the Town, has the broadest market area, meeting regional and town-wide, as well as neighborhood business needs.

Cushing Square has a very substantial neighborhood market area, but it also contains a significant number of town-wide businesses and professional offices.

Waverly is currently split between neighborhood establishments on the west side of Trapelo Road, opposite enterprises serving more regional needs on the east. The integration of Shaw's supermarket into this area will pose a major traffic challenge and may also threaten the continued existence of some of the neighborhood businesses.

Harvard Lawn is only one of a number of convenience-oriented business areas that does not have the size or variety to be classified as a commercial center. Similarly, other portions of Trapelo Road, as well as several local business zones on Concord Avenue and Brighton Road, now serve various local functions. Also not included in this study, are the regionally oriented businesses strung along Pleasant Street between Route 2 and Waverly.

Businesses have naturally developed at nodes and along the major traffic arteries crossing town and serving the region. Fortunately, the Pleasant Street (Route 60) traffic by-passes Belmont Center, but otherwise all commercial areas front on traffic arteries. At the same time, business-related parking intrudes into residential neighborhoods.

Other than Belmont Center, the entrances to the commercial areas tend to be either poorly defined or visually negative. There is little evidence of effective efforts to address the impact of commercial areas on abutting residential areas, such as the long term parking on residential streets.

Rather, since the centers evolved on main arteries, they have, over time, been increasingly opened to vehicular access through widening and the removal of trees to the detriment of the pedestrian environment. Wide open intersections and disorganized off-street parking are unsightly; and most off-street lots provide no buffering.

Currently, the commercial areas lack physical evidence of the Town as a public, caring presence. There are few street amenities, sitting areas, gathering points, and in general, pedestrians are left "on their own."

TRAFFIC AND SAFETY

Major streets under state control, such as Trapelo Road and Pleasant Street, have repeatedly been widened and modified to improve their traffic-bearing capacity, and residential streets are increasingly used to by-pass congestion. In the past, Belmont appears to have frequently opted to facilitate vehicular movement (and fire equipment access) at the expense of pedestrian uses.

It seems time to recognize that traffic will always be near capacity, and that some congestion is healthy because it discourages traversing of the Town by those who have no business here, slows traffic flow and may reduce serious accidents.

Compare Pleasant street entering Arlington, with its new curbs, roadway, and well-defined parking strip, with the same arterial street as it enters Belmont -- and the fundamentally different approach to coping with traffic immediately becomes evident.

Installing curbs, creating neck-downs, pedestrian islands, sanctuaries and cross-overs, and installing signalling devices like traffic lights and blinkers, or even speed bumps or dips is now more important than trying to accommodate any more vehicles cutting through Belmont. Preliminary recommendations are offered for each center in a following section.

PARKING AND SERVICING

The centers have been widened to the point where there is much double and even some triple parking --by those with "quick errands" and delivery trucks. Nevertheless, most centers experience a deficit of parking spaces, which is more "perceived" than real as drivers jockey for spaces in front of stores, while a short distance away there are empty spaces in an off-street lot.

Extensive "meter feeding" and inadequate enforcement of regulations and posted limits has effectively reduced the available supply. No doubt, commuters taking advantage of the Waverly bus have compounded parking problems in the entire residential area adjoining Trapelo Road. Long-term parkers occupy spaces that should be made available to short-term convenience customers.

Parking is a resource, both on- and off-street, that can be used considerably more effectively, enhancing the business climate. Beyond these town-wide recommendations, suggestions tailored to each center follow.

- establish diagonal parking and loading zones

- discourage and prosecute double and triple parking
- take out meters, replace with one hour posted zones, with "meter maid" enforcement, paid for through fines collected for parking violations.
- issue stickers for merchant and employee parking in far sections of municipal lots, renewable quarterly to prevent abuses.
- encourage off-time loading, particularly in major streets and require loading docks for major new developments, etc.

URBAN DESIGN

There are attractive buildings and historic structures in every center than can provide identity and add grace, charm, and a sense of tradition, pursuing the Mainstreet USA approach. Some individuals have made a commitment to design improvements, more attractive signs and store fronts, which, if expanded, would provide cohesion and a sense of place. In general, however, the centers lack a consistent and coherent approach to facade design.

Eyesores and neglect are best addressed gradually over time, guided by a clear concept of the types of improvements in appearances to be sought. A "new look" can be attained through influencing basic licensing and establishing special permits where land use changes are significant:

Site Plan Review for new land uses should be developed as a negotiating tool in order to prevent such undesirable land uses as structures out of scale with their neighborhood context. To these ends:

- the Town Zoning By-law should be modified to require site plan review via a Special Permit for any change in land use in excess of 1,000 gross sq. ft. of built space, excluding Single Residence A, B, and C Areas.
- the Zoning By-Law (under Chap. 40a) can designate the present Planning Board to have Special Permit granting authority, as mentioned above.

Use Licenses currently seem to be issued without considering appearance of premises; annual review would be possible and beneficial for many uses such as the following:

- common victualer's license (any place with seating for eating)

- food vendors (White Hen Pantry type establishments)
- car dealers, Class I (new), and Class II (used)
- gas stations licensed to store fuels whenever storage tanks are installed or renewed
- possibility of licensing service bars in restaurants only, which requires first a warrant article, then a petition to the legislature, and finally town-wide ratification. The entire process took 18 months for Arlington, and 24 months for Winchester, once the commitment was made.

BELMONT CENTER

The following recommendations are designed to enhance Belmont Center as the recognized Town Center by improving its commercial vitality, image and operational characteristics. (Map 2)

We recommend that:

The Town initiate the legislative process that will result in two to three service bar licenses. Having at least one fully licensed restaurant in Belmont Center would create a more effective business mix and complement major attractions such as Filene's.

For all major reconstruction projects and new developments on the south side of Leonard Street, Town site plan review policy should encourage "pass through" access from Claflin Street to Leonard Street to help support businesses on the north side of Leonard Street.

The Town Engineering Department analyze the possibility of providing angle parking on the north side of Leonard Street, in order to increase the supply of convenient short-term parking spaces.

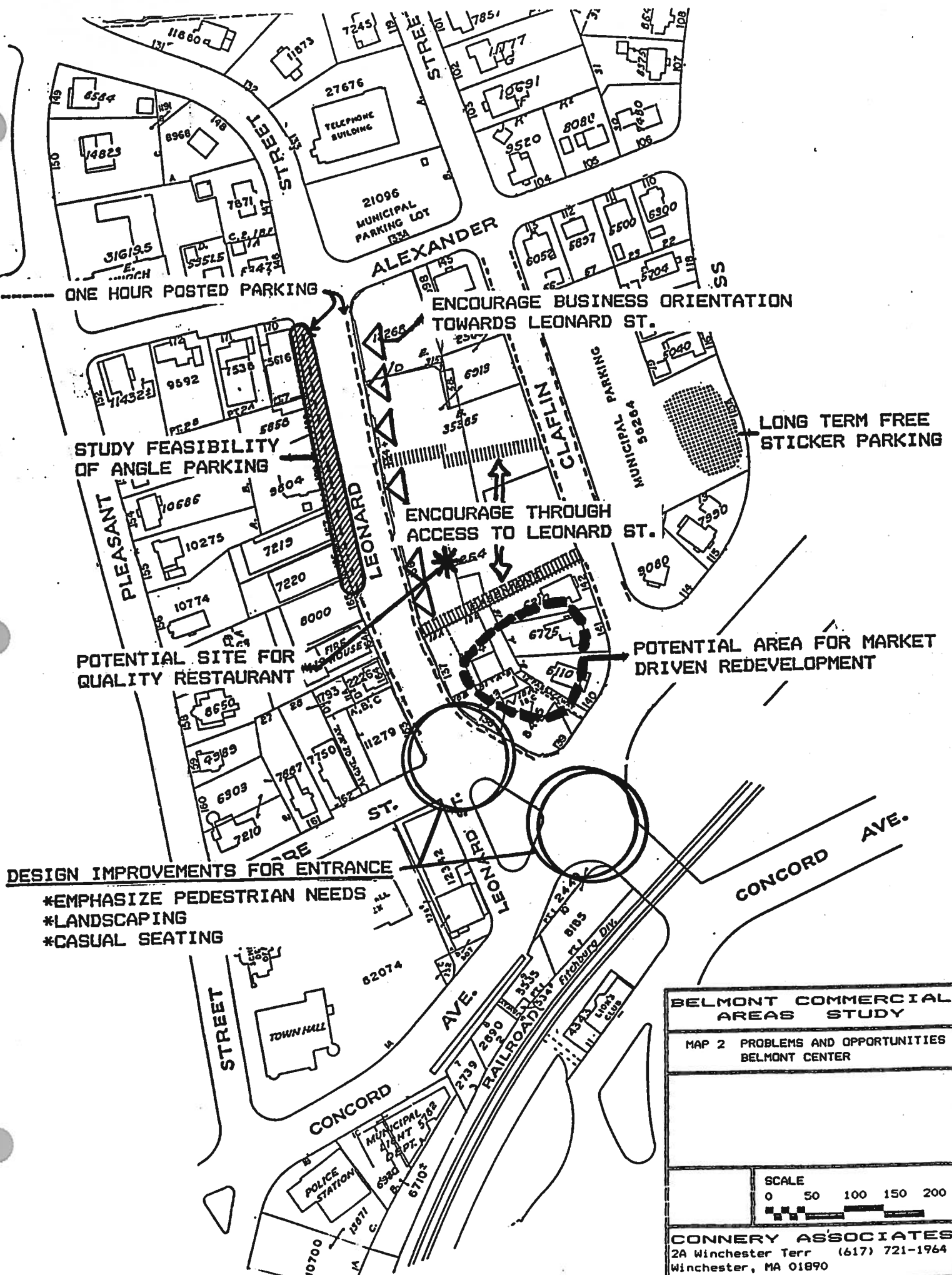
The Town sanction a 60 day parking experiment in the summer of 1986 to determine the effectiveness of a one hour posted parking management program on Leonard Street. It is further recommended that the Town test the route book methodology during the experimental period.

The Town, in conjunction with the above mentioned on-street experiment, provide for free parking in the Claflin Street Parking Lot so that the 40 spaces closest to Claflin Street are for a maximum of two-hours and all others are for two hours or more (by sticker only). In the latter area, parking shall not be allowed between the hours of 6 a.m. and 8:35 a.m. daily, (not including Saturdays) in order to discourage commuter use.

For the foreseeable future, Claflin Street should remain a public street, and if demand warrants, any additional parking in the Center it should be designed as a sub surface facility on the Claflin Street Lot.

The Town initiate an urban design study, culminating in a Belmont Center improvement plan to be implemented in stages over a ten year period with Town funds and/or State grants, as they may become available. Such a plan should:

- Reverse the traditional emphasis and bias towards vehicular traffic and create a more pedestrian oriented Town Center. In particular, attention should be given to sitting areas, pedestrian safety, and methods to



- reduce vehicular speed in the Belmont Center; and
- Encourage facade designs that provide for more show window space, and discourage long "blank" walls.

CUSHING SQUARE

As a commercial center serving portions of Belmont and Watertown, Cushing Square is doing well. However, in order to insure its role as a successful neighborhood center, a number of actions should be undertaken. (Map 3)

We recommend that:

Future development be limited to a capacity consistent with a neighborhood center and not a town-wide or regional commercial area.

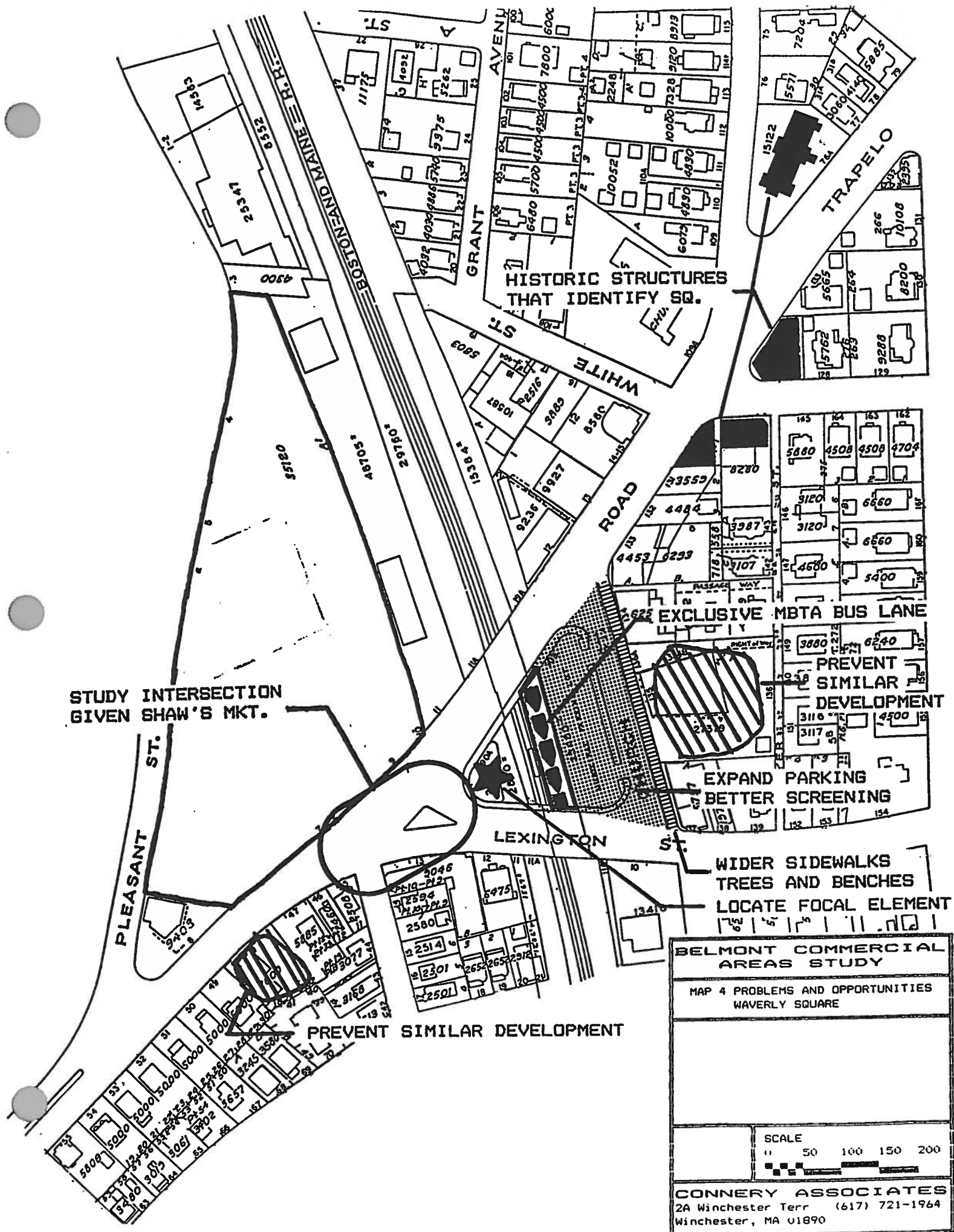
Development capacity of the Square and immediate environs should be analyzed to insure that the level of growth allowed by present zoning is not at an amount that would alter the neighborhood commercial orientation in the future.

The Town conduct traffic and urban design studies to seek ways to redress the longstanding bias towards promoting more traffic flow, and focus on pedestrian needs instead. In particular, the widening of sidewalks and the provision of shorter and safer pedestrian crossing points should receive the highest priority.

The Town, in cooperation with the Chamber of Commerce, seek ways of working with the owner of the Masonic Temple to : 1) improve the visual image of the present facade and 2) promote reuse of the building for appropriate commercial uses such as retail, restaurants, or upper story offices.

The Town should conduct a posted parking experiment in Cushing Square (similar to that proposed for Belmont Center) and allow for free parking in the public lot fronting on Trapelo Road using a system similar to the one proposed for Belmont Center.

The Town should initiate a Cushing Square improvement plan (Like the one for the Center) which encourages more of the facade treatment of Small Wonders and further enhances the attractive structures like the Belmont Savings Bank building.



WAVERLY SQUARE (Map 4)

Waverly Square is a commercial area in transition. It will be a challenge to integrate Shaw's supermarket into this area, which already has both neighborhood and regional aspects. These potentially conflicting characteristics can be resolved through proper Town planning, commencing immediately.

We recommend that:

The Town and the developers of Shaw's Supermarkets work together through a public/private community planning committee to insure that future regional scale development and traffic associated with the proposed new supermarket does not overwhelm the more neighborhood aspects of Waverly Square. Shaw's must be carefully integrated into the traffic patterns on adjoining arterials.

Zoning allowances in Waverly Square be reviewed to insure that potential future developments or redevelopments along Church Street remain at a neighborhood scale.

Church Street be closed to through traffic and the MBTA bus stop be moved to an exclusive lane between the municipal parking lot and the railroad right of way to augment the neighborhood aspects of Waverly Square. Expand the existing side walk at least 15 feet into Church Street to create a pedestrian promenade, and use the remainder of the area for additional public parking, with improved screening and landscaping.

The Town erect a public monument, flagpole, or similar focal element on the public property now formed by the intersection of Lexington and Trapelo Road in order to give the Square a sense of location and identity.

The Town should undertake an urban design analysis of Waverly Square with particular attention given to highlighting the attractive older commercial buildings, and improving pedestrian access and safety.

HARVARD LAWN (Map 5)

Harvard Lawn is not a full commercial center but a small commercial area serving neighborhood needs that appears well maintained. To maintain these characteristics, we recommend that public improvements such as new sidewalks be allocated for the area. We do not recommend any programs that would expand this commercial area. However, we do recommend using this example as the basis of a study to determine how weaker strip developments in Belmont can be appropriately recycled.

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NEXT STEPS:

Along with its Zoning By-Law, the Town's planning and permitting process should be reviewed and revised to prevent further unanticipated development. We recommend the following actions, pointing out they will require some modest staff or outside consultant support:

In 1986:

The Board of Selectmen should encourage a stronger Chamber of Commerce by meeting bi-weekly with its president (10 minutes, first item on agenda).

The Board of Selectmen should establish a Community Planning Committee that meets on a regular basis. It should have representation from both the private and public sectors (Selectmen, Planning Board, Chamber of Commerce, Realty and Preservation/Conservation interests, etc.) This committee should address the following as year one agenda items:

- prepare a general work program for Belmont's commercial centers.
- Organize a fundraising campaign to raise 50 per cent of the cost of a comprehensive commercial center study from private sources and approach the Belmont Town Meeting for the balance of the funds.
- Make recommendations to the appropriate private interests and public boards concerning: Shaw's Supermarket (Waverly) Sage's (Belmont enter) and the Masonic Temple (Cushing Square).
- Initiate a Town-wide forum to discuss a service liquor license in Belmont; and eventually take the lead in the process to establish such licenses.

Beyond 1986

Work with in-house or consultant planning services to create commercial center plans that include recommendations for the following items:

- zoning amendments
- traffic and parking improvement programs
- urban design improvements
- marketing programs to attract needed businesses

Provide recommendations on various development proposals, and serve as a resource for public boards charged with making decisions on various permits and licenses.

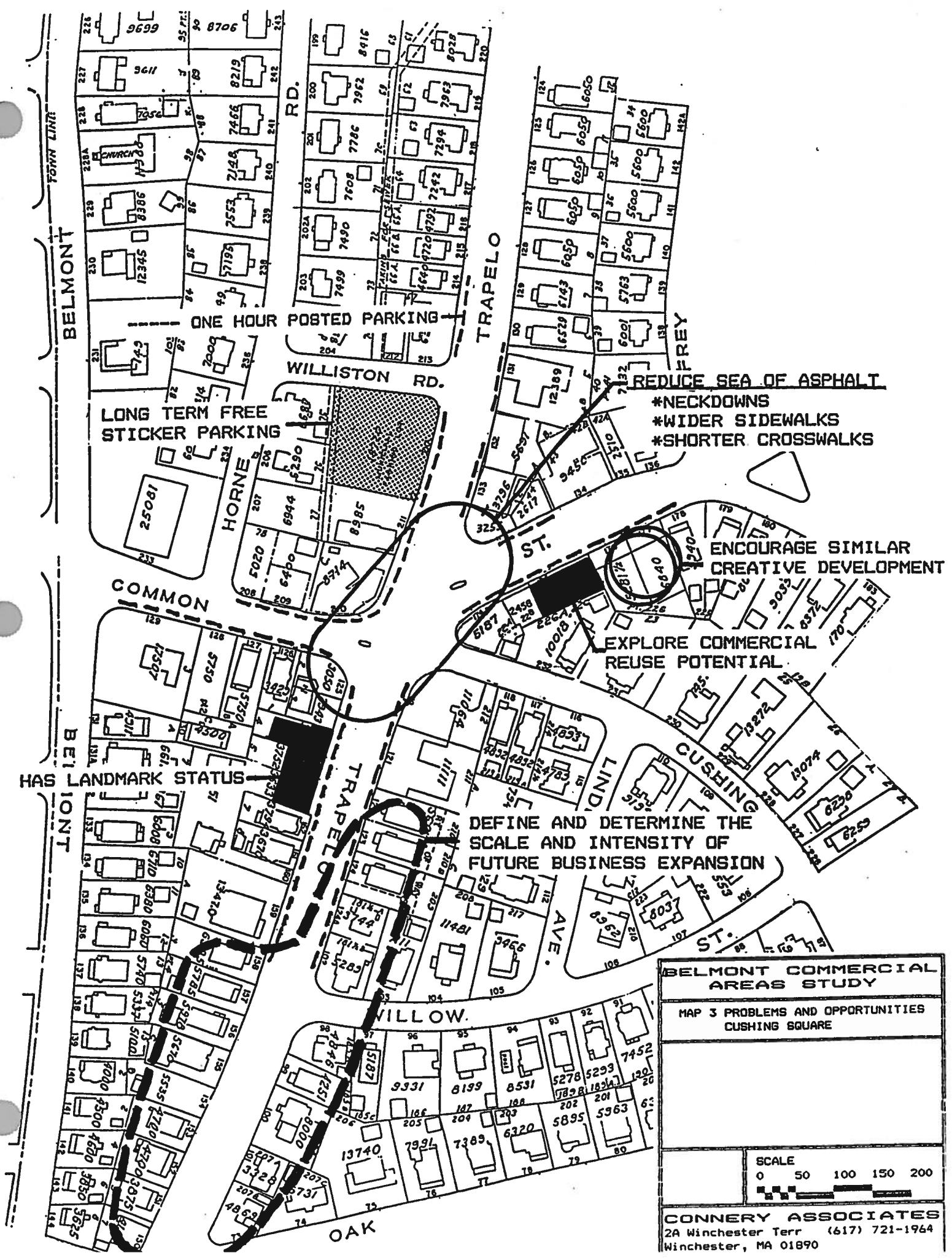
In addition, we recommend that the Board of Selectmen provide the President of the Chamber of Commerce a biweekly "ten minute first item on the agenda" privilege, in order to promote a stronger Chamber of Commerce and to maintain a working relationship with the business and development community.

IN CONCLUSION

We strongly urge the establishment of a Community Planning Committee to begin the planning process outlined in this reconnaissance report. This committee should not attempt to prepare detailed plans by itself, but rather organize a planning process developed around known commercial issues (i.e. Shaw's Supermarket, the former Sage Market vacancy, and the Masonic Temple). Also, organize public discussions concerning the issues raised by development proposals, traffic patterns, pedestrian needs, attraction of quality restaurants and the requisite steps to attain service liquor licenses in Belmont, etc.

The long-term success of the commercial centers will depend on the results of the committee's efforts to establish credibility and lay the groundwork for a more detailed planning and implementation process to be carried out in coming years.

Upgrading Belmont's commercial areas, the "show windows" of the Town in a manner consistent with the existing high quality residential image, will not come about without a stronger public/private commitment to change Belmont's reactive posture to rapidly rising development pressures. Establishing an appropriate planning process will not be a major expense, but rather an investment that will be amply repaid in sounder future property values in the Town in coming years.



ONE HOUR POSTED PARKING

LONG TERM FREE STICKER PARKING

REDUCE SEA OF ASPHALT

- *NECKDOWNS
- *WIDER SIDEWALKS
- *SHORTER CROSSWALKS

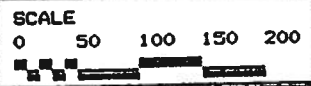
ENCOURAGE SIMILAR CREATIVE DEVELOPMENT

EXPLORE COMMERCIAL REUSE POTENTIAL

DEFINE AND DETERMINE THE SCALE AND INTENSITY OF FUTURE BUSINESS EXPANSION

BELMONT COMMERCIAL AREAS STUDY

MAP 3 PROBLEMS AND OPPORTUNITIES CUSHING SQUARE



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