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March 17, 2021

David Mohler, Chair
Boston Region Metropolitan Planning Organization
State Transportation Building
10 Park Plaza, Suite 2150
Boston, MA 02116-3968

Via email at David.Mohler@state.ma.us

Dear Chairperson Mohler and Members of the Boston Region MPO:

On behalf of the Town of Belmont, we write in strong support of Project #609204 (Community Path, Belmont Component of the Mass Central Rail Trail [Phase 1]), and to express our full commitment to completing this important project. This project enjoys broad and deep support within the Town of Belmont, including among our elected leaders, professional Town staff, and the public at large, and we are confident that the community path will become a vital public resource – for recreation, transportation, and economic development – for the Town and our surrounding communities when it is constructed. Since 2012, successive Belmont Select Boards have appointed standing committees to push the community path project from concept to reality, and Belmont's representative Town Meeting has repeatedly appropriated, by overwhelming margins, more than \$1.5 million in capital budget and Community Preservation Act funding to date for the feasibility study and design of this project. The current standing project committee, the [Belmont Community Path Project Committee \(CPPC\)](#) is working closely with the Town's design consultant, Nitsch Engineering, to formally submit 25% design plans for the project to MassDOT this spring, and expects to complete 100% design in 2022. Other major Town projects, including the \$300 million [Belmont Middle and High School project](#), have expressly accounted for and accommodated the planned path into their design and construction. As such, we urge the Boston Region MPO to program this project for funding as soon as possible.

As this project has been discussed within Belmont for nearly 30 years, and taken on significant momentum over the past five years with the completion of a feasibility study and the initiation of design, the Town is well aware that some residents are – and will likely remain – opposed to the construction of the community path. Recently, we have learned of a coordinated campaign

initiated by some of those residents to target the Boston Region MPO as it deliberates on programming the project for funding. While those individuals certainly have every right to express their opinions on the project to the MPO, their letters and statements have unfortunately included a number of misstatements and inaccuracies regarding the project and the process by which the Town has engaged with the public. We seek to correct and clarify the record regarding the project here.¹

As noted, the Town understands that a small (but vocal) group of residents, particularly those whose properties abut the future path, worry about the potential ramifications of having a community path near their properties. The Town is sensitive to these concerns and has sought to understand and address them in good faith through a thorough and equitable process, and has endeavored to reach and engage with as many residents as possible regarding the project. The Town has provided (and will continue to provide) many opportunities for members of the public to receive accurate information about the status of the project, review proposed routes and design elements, ask questions of the Town's engineering consultants, provide constructive input, and express concerns. An overview of the Town's public engagement efforts for the project may be helpful in illustrating this commitment.

Public Engagement: 2012-2021

The process of resident engagement regarding this project began in earnest in 2012, with the first of three Select-Board appointed standing project committees, the Community Path Advisory Committee (CPAC). This committee was charged by the Belmont Select Board to “[c]ommunicate, solicit input, and involve the Belmont community with the CPAC's work.” In June 2014, CPAC submitted a [final report](#) to the Belmont Select Board. Chapter 8 of that report (pages 64-70), entitled “Community Feedback,” summarizes results of an online poll with approximately 1,400 responses. 1,050 of these were from Belmont residents, of whom 90% were supportive of the path (including 80% “strongly supportive”), 5% were neutral, and 5% were opposed to a path. A paper poll mailed to 332 abutters and other residents with houses close to the path elicited 88 responses (26.5%) and revealed a dichotomy between the views of Channing Road residents and other abutters, with Channing Road residents generally viewing the path more negatively. CPAC also held two public forums, both well attended, at which several of the recent letter writers expressed their views. However, the substantial majority of input at the public forums was positive, as documented in an appendix to the CPAC final report. In response to the concerns expressed by Channing Road residents, CPAC undertook a comprehensive review of over 40 published studies on the impact of new bicycle or multi-use paths on property values, user safety, crime, and other potential adverse impacts (Chapter 6 of the CPAC report, pages 17-47). The conclusion, in brief, was that paths increase property values (supported by the universal practice of real estate brokers to list any nearby path as an amenity) and do not adversely impact crime.

CPAC was succeeded by a second Belmont Select Board-appointed committee, the Community Path Implementation Advisory Committee (CPIAC). This committee was charged by the Select Board with procuring an engineering consultant to conduct a feasibility study and working with the consultant throughout the feasibility study process. The concerns of abutters were presented

¹ The Town is aware that a similar campaign occurred in FY2020. The Town's response to the MPO in that instance can be found [here](#).

to the Town's consultants from the Pare Corporation at the outset of the process, and also aired at [ten well-attended public engagement meetings](#) (facilitated by the Pare team) between 2015-2017. These meetings were essential to the development of the feasibility study by Pare and the CPIAC. Two members of CPIAC and a member of the Belmont Select Board also met with approximately 30 Channing Road residents at the home of an abutter to ensure that abutters were able to provide input in a smaller, more intimate setting.

After the completion of the [feasibility study](#) in late 2017, the Belmont Select Board engaged in substantial public deliberations regarding the final alignment of the community path, especially as to whether the Eastern portion of the path should be located on the North or South side of the MBTA Fitchburg Line (both alignments had scored similarly highly in the matrix utilized by Pare in the feasibility study). The Select Board weighed a number of factors² and accepted much public input before voting unanimously to approve the alignment on the Northern side of the Fitchburg Line for final design of phase 1 of the community path.

After approving the final alignment, the Belmont Select Board created the current standing committee, the CPPC, and charged it with procuring a design consultant to design phase 1 of the community path. As the design process has progressed, the CPPC, with the Nitsch team, has continued to engage the public and key Town stakeholders on this project. Specifically, Nitsch met with many Town staff and committees with potential interests in the project, and the CPPC and Nitsch held an abutter-focused site walk in November 2019. Additionally, Nitsch has held or is scheduling individual meetings with numerous abutters in 2020 and 2021. In addition, the CPPC and Nitsch held a public forum in July 2020 to present Nitsch's draft 25% design plans, which was accompanied by an online survey and a solicitation of public comments on the draft designs. These efforts have helped shape the actual design plans produced by the Nitsch team. Importantly, the CPPC and Nitsch are also planning a public forum later this spring to present the submitted 25% design to the Belmont community and to solicit additional comments and feedback in advance of MassDOT's formal design public hearing on the project.³

Addressing specific factual errors in the recent communications to the MPO

As illustrated above, the Town is fully committed to resolving or mitigating as many resident concerns regarding this project as possible, though it also realizes that it will not be possible to address every concern to each individual's satisfaction, and that some residents are likely to oppose the project no matter what. This opposition seems to have led a number of individuals to include false or misleading information in their recent communications to the MPO. The Town seeks to address some of that misinformation here.

² These factors included safety concerns expressed by the MBTA regarding the track crossing needed from the existing Fitchburg Cutoff path to the Southern alignment, as well as the need to demolish at least a portion of a privately-owned commercial structure on the South side of the tracks in order to provide sufficient off-set from the active railway. On the other hand, the Northern alignment would place the community path closer to the residential properties along Channing Road.

³ In addition, all regular CPPC meetings are open to the public, though the chair typically limits public comment at these meetings in order to allow the committee (composed primarily of volunteer Belmont residents and professional Town staff) adequate time to conduct its business during these working meetings.

Some individuals indicate that the Town contemplates permanent takings of private residential property along the path alignment. In fact, the need for permanent easements from any homeowner is likely to be minimal or non-existent, though some temporary easements may be necessary during the period of construction. Minimizing the project's impact on residential properties will be aided by the expressed intention of a local non-profit, the Belmont Citizen's Forum, to donate a parcel of land that was formerly part of the Massachusetts Central Railroad for the purpose of constructing the community path.

Another misconception is about lighting on the path. While no final decisions regarding lighting have been made, the CPPC has made clear in its public discussions that it does not recommend lighting along the length of the path, but only in areas such as the underpass at Alexander Avenue and potentially at key intersections where it is likely to materially enhance safety, as deemed necessary by the Town's design consultant. Suggestions that the Town has definitively decided to light the full length of the path are simply false.

Some individuals also raised concerns about drainage effects on neighboring properties and about the removal of existing trees along the route. Adequate drainage has been a design priority throughout the process, and the Nitsch team has presented detailed information to the public about this issue. For example, at the July 2020 public forum, the Nitsch team presented their plan for swales tied into an underground drainage system that will empty into the Belmont storm drain infrastructure (see slides 46-49 of the [July presentation at the public forum](#)). The Town is committed to a final design that is appropriately engineered to avoid water discharge to adjacent properties.

While some trees and vegetation will need to be removed from the path right-of-way, much of the existing vegetation along the right-of-way is invasive in nature and a number of the trees are diseased. The new design calls for replacement of impacted vegetation with trees and plantings appropriate for screening and with an emphasis on native species. The Nitsch design team includes a qualified landscape architecture firm that has been heavily involved in the conversations with path abutters and the overall public engagement and design process. Overall, the Town expects significantly greater tree cover when the path is complete and the new plantings have matured.

Other commenters expressed concerns about crime. Studies of rail trails and linear parks (reviewed in detail in chapter 6 of the CPAC report, as noted above) have demonstrated that paths do not affect crime rates and may improve social ties.

Some writers also express concerns about public safety. However, the Town expects this project will actually significantly enhance public safety, and notes that at least four deaths have occurred on the Fitchburg Line tracks between Brighton Street and Belmont High School since 1984 (several likely suicides). The path will be designed with secure barriers between the path and the existing MBTA rail lines, finally ending the longstanding practice of unsafe crossings of the tracks by generations of Belmont youth, and the new underpass will provide a safe crossing for residents from a heavily populated neighborhood to access the new high school/middle school complex, the public library, town swimming pool and other town amenities.

The Town of Belmont remains dedicated to an open and collaborative process to design and construct the Belmont Community Path. The Town will continue to provide information to and seek input from all stakeholders – including those who oppose the construction of the path – and will work toward an equitable outcome, as we have since the outset. However, the Town is fully committed to seeing this project to fruition, and our pledge to continued engagement should not be misunderstood as a lack of resolve. The Town believes that the path will be an important asset for the Town and surrounding communities – providing a safe and efficient transportation corridor and connections to regional multimodal transportation hubs; recreational, health and economic benefits to the Town and regional community; and enhance integration with civic and business amenities. We very much look forward to continue working with the Boston Region MPO to ensure the completion of this project, and we again urge you to program this project for funding without delay. Please do not hesitate to contact us through Town’s project manager and Director of Community Development Glenn Clancy at gclancy@belmont-ma.gov if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

The Belmont Community Path Project Committee, comprised of:

Russell Leino, Chair
Bonnie Friedman, Vice-Chair
Ellen Sugarman, Secretary
Philip Lawrence, Member
Holly Muson, Member
Vincent Stanton, Member
Catherine Bowen, Member, School Committee Member, and liaison to the School Committee
Roy Epstein, Chair, Select Board, and liaison to the Select Board
Patrice Garvin, Town Administrator
Glenn Clancy, P.E., Director of Community Development
Jay Marcotte, Director of Public Works

CC:

The Belmont Select Board, comprised of:

Roy Epstein, Chair (via email at repstein@belmont-ma.gov)
Thomas Caputo, Vice Chair (via email at tcaputo@belmont-ma.gov)
Adam Dash, Member (via email at adash@belmont-ma.gov)

State Senator William Brownsberger (via email at william.brownsberger@masenate.gov)

State Representative David Rogers (via email at dave.rogers@mahouse.gov)

Matt Genova, CTPS Staff (via email at mgenova@ctps.org)