

**Report to the Board of Selectmen  
of the Town of Belmont**

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# **An Idea Whose Time Has Come:**

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The Study of and Recommendations for the  
Consolidation of the Town of Belmont's  
Public Works Functions

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# An Idea Whose Time Has Come: Public Works Consolidation

## **Purpose and Need for Study**

### **Joint Resolution**

Last year, the Boards of Selectmen, Water Commissioners, and Cemetery Commissioners by unanimous vote of each Board signed a joint resolution (Appendix A) expressing their interest in the principle of a consolidated Public Work Department and directing the Town Administrator and the Highway Superintendent to produce a report which considers all key issues related to a potential consolidation of the Town's public works functions and to develop action recommendations.

### **Fiscal Reality**

The Town of Belmont continually confronts difficult fiscal issues resulting from a tax base heavily weighted toward residential properties; the current budget crisis at the state level which has reduced local aid to our community; and growing capital project needs. The Town must be fiscally prudent in its operations to ensure that operational efficiency is maximized at the same time as costs are minimized. The Town should explore every opportunity to capitalize on potential efficiencies gained from consolidating four currently independent operations under the direction of one department manager with shared administrative support.

### **Productivity, Efficiency and Quality**

Sound public management principles strongly advocate for the consolidation of shared functions among a pool of resources so that as needs arise, resources can be efficiently allocated to meet each particular demand—no more and no less than is needed for any particular time. A consolidated Public Works Department will create opportunities to achieve this level of efficiency, quality response, and productivity.

### **It's an Idea That's Been Recommended Before**

Since 1975, the Town has undertaken four studies, including this one, related to the potential consolidation of the Town's public works functions. The previous three included:

- 1) King Commission Report (1976)<sup>1</sup>: This report, prepared by a special committee appointed by the Board of Selectmen in 1975 to study cost savings within public works departments, is probably the most applicable study for our purposes. The report was a fairly detailed report of the operations and resources of the departments and operations at that time. The committee concluded that there were cost savings and efficiencies that would result in combining functions of the departments. This included meter reading and utility billing functions, operations and maintenance, and emergencies such as snow plowing. The committee recommended that a single department under the jurisdiction of the Board of Selectmen be established to provide

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<sup>1</sup> *Report of the Study Committee on Town Services* (King Committee), Joseph C. King, Bennett Mandel, Walter Flewelling, John Bishop, and Joseph Kales, Belmont, Massachusetts, 1976.

all public works related services. The report identified a number of legal, political and administrative hurdles and recommended further study to identify implementation solutions. To our knowledge, no such study was conducted and none of the major recommendations of the King Report were ever implemented.

- 2) Shaw Report (1986)<sup>2</sup>: Commissioned in 1985 to study the management structure of the Town, the team of Kennedy Shaw and Thomas Groux evaluated many management aspects of town government. The bulk of the study involved the analysis of executive leadership and management and resulted in the recommendation to establish an Executive Secretary (now Town Administrator) position. Other aspects of the report, however, addressed public works functions. In particular, Shaw and Groux observed that the water and light departments needed to be viewed less independently from other Town departments and functions. Further, they recommended that the Town combine management of the Highway and Water departments into a consolidated Public Facilities department. They also noted that responsibility for maintenance of Town buildings should be included in this new department.
- 3) Consolidation Study Committee Report (1994)<sup>3</sup>: In 1994, a special committee established by the Board of Selectmen explored a number of Town functions and responsibilities for potential consolidation. The major focus of the committee's efforts was Town/School consolidation. However, the committee members observed that a more formal reorganization or consolidation of public works departments might be prudent. In addition, a key recommendation of this committee was the combined meter reading and utility billing function.

Each of these studies recommended the consolidation of the Town's public works functions.

## **Everybody's Doing It**

"Everybody's Doing It"—Generally, this is not a good reason to allow a teenager to stay out past curfew; however, it is a good reason for the consolidation of Belmont's public works functions. More than 75% of cities nationally<sup>4</sup> and an even greater proportion (more than 96%) of the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority participating-communities operate with consolidated public works departments (see Appendix B). Regardless of an MWRA community's population or land area, the public works organizational model appears to work for these communities. If so many communities have moved to this model of municipal service delivery for their public works functions, we must ask ourselves: What opportunities exist for Belmont to improve its service delivery and efficiency through consolidation?

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<sup>2</sup> *Town of Belmont Study of Management Structure* (Shaw Report), Kennedy Shaw and Thomas Groux, K. S. Associates, Boston Massachusetts, February 1986.

<sup>3</sup> *Final Report of the Belmont Consolidation Study Committee* (Consolidation Study Committee Report), Beth Corwin, Myron Cronan, Fred Deignan, Jim Fitzgerald, Tomi Olson, Carl Rosenberg, Penny Schafer, Russell Simpson, and Anne Warner, Belmont, Massachusetts, June 21, 1994.

<sup>4</sup> *Management of Local Public Works*, Cristofano, et al, editors, International City Management Association, Washington, DC, 1986 (p. 23)

## **Approach**

### **Introduction**

Over the past seven months, we have conducted an exhaustive, top-to-bottom review of the public works issue that required a significant amount of time and effort. As part of our analysis we have completed the following:

- 1) Held interviews with the primary stakeholders in a potential consolidation of the public works functions: commissioners, department heads, and assistant department heads. In addition, we met with the Town Accountant, Director of Community Development, and the Light Department General Manager. Through these interviews we sought to better understand the potential opportunities and challenges presented by consolidation.
- 2) Reviewed public works consolidation studies that have been conducted by the Town in the past. These studies include, the "King" report (1976), the "Shaw" report (1986), and the Consolidation Study Committee Report (1994).
- 3) Worked with Town Counsel to study legal issues that may be involved in consolidating the Town's public works functions. In Belmont, both water distribution and burial functions have been established under the legal jurisdiction of independently elected authorities.
- 4) Interviewed public works directors in the towns of Arlington, Brookline, Lexington, Watertown, Wellesley and Winchester to collect data about community statistics (e.g., population, road miles, etc.), organizational structures, budgets, staffing, and equipment resources to provide insight into potential public works structures and efficiencies.
- 5) Compiled data about the current organizational structures, staffing, budgets, and equipment resources of the Buildings and Facilities, Cemetery, Highway, and Water Departments for comparison to other communities.
- 6) Met with public works consultants, Municipal Resources, Inc., to discuss our analytical approach to the task of considering the potential consolidation of the public works functions.

### **Stakeholder Interviews**

Early in September 2002, the working group invited key stakeholders to sit down to discuss their ideas, concerns, and questions about the potential consolidation of the Town's public works functions. These stakeholders included the Board of Water Commissioners, the Board of Cemetery Commissioners, department heads and assistant department heads. Each participant was asked the following questions as well as given the opportunity to address any additional ideas or concerns he/she may have:

- 1) What opportunities for improvements in the delivery of services would consolidation create?
- 2) What disadvantages are there in consolidating?

### 3) How would your department fit into a consolidated public works department?

The interviews were a valuable source of information about the current operations and the primary issues that these key individuals see in the potential consolidation of the Town's public works functions. The following is a summary of the responses received.

#### **Quality of Work**

Everyone interviewed spoke highly of the current levels of service and productivity shown by their respective department. Most felt that their departments were functioning at a peak level of efficiency, given their current resources. A few individuals voiced concern that the quality services their departments currently offer may be jeopardized under a consolidated public works structure if the public works director has differing priorities and diverts necessary resources from their functions to other tasks.

#### **Sharing of Resources**

At the same time, individuals spoke repeatedly of the high level of voluntary sharing of resources (staff and equipment) among the various public works functions. In particular, the Highway Department was mentioned as the most frequent contributor of resources to support other Town functions. A few individuals stated that this informal sharing of resources worked so well, they were not sure why consolidation was necessary.

#### **Cohesiveness of Units**

Many stakeholders spoke highly of the sense of camaraderie and teamwork within each individual department's labor pool. Many noted a high level of pride within each of the various public works functions. There was a strong desire to maintain this esprit de corps under any consolidation scenario. Specifically, respondents cautioned against dissolving team units and recommended continued specialization within Town functions. On the other hand, many individuals noted the potential for cross-training among the various specializations to allow for enhanced emergency responsiveness. The stakeholders suggested a sensitive balance must be achieved between maintaining work teams, while also allowing for significant cross-training to allow for the shifting of labor resources as peak times demand.

#### **Value of Existing Staff**

Respondents spoke highly of the existing staff and argued strongly against implementing any change that would result in layoffs of existing staff or result in reductions in individuals' current compensation.

#### **Location**

Stakeholders provided mixed recommendations with respect to the optimal location of a consolidated public works department. Many spoke of the desirability to centrally locate the public works department within one facility. Others spoke of the importance of maintaining satellite offices in areas of high public demand (e.g., cemetery and in the vicinity of the recreation facilities on Concord Avenue).

## **Statutory Authority**

Many respondents who serve on the elected boards currently overseeing the cemetery and water operations expressed concern that advocacy for important projects and issues within each of these functions (e.g., new cemetery land and the water main replacement capital program) would be lost as a result of completely eliminating these boards. In addition, individuals wondered who would arbitrate public complaints about bills, problems, and service quality. While some respondents stated that independent authorities for the water and cemetery functions were not necessary, and that the policy responsibility could be bestowed in the Board of Selectmen, others urged the continuation of these boards, at a minimum, as advisory boards. A number of respondents noted that any consolidation of these functions would require a statutory change that specifically articulates the assignment of the policy-making authority and the discrete powers and duties that are to be vested in the Public Works Director as an agent of the Town.

## **Other Opportunities**

Participants provided a varied list of potential opportunities from consolidation. These included the potential to:

- *Consolidate administrative resources and billing functions;*
- *Purchase more efficient and productive equipment if it is purchased to support an entire public works department versus a smaller department;*
- *Standardize purchasing of equipment to make it easier for the Town's central mechanics shop to maintain equipment;*
- *Increase labor pool availability and quality, by virtue of more staff and increased opportunities for cross-training; and*
- *Institute alternative work shifts that would reduce the need for overtime and provide a higher level of service.*

The results of the interviews reflect a need to consolidate the public works functions in a way that is sensitive to the many positive attributes of the current operations. A later section will discuss the unique nature of each of the Town's major public works functions.

## **Legal Analysis**

The Town of Belmont does not have a specific charter that clearly details the various organizational responsibility and authority of its officials and boards. Instead, the Town's structure is the result of a patchwork of state laws and local by-laws adopted since its inception in 1859. In general, the Board of Selectmen maintains authority for all municipal affairs and for specific functions that are not alternatively legally provided. In Belmont, both water distribution and burial functions have been established under the legal jurisdiction of independently elected authorities. Appendix C contains copies of applicable state laws and local by-laws.

### **Water Distribution**

The Town has adopted Chapter 296 of the Acts of 1885, *An Act to Supply the Town of Belmont and its Inhabitants with Water*. This act authorized the establishment of a water

system by taking land and water rights, acquiring pipe and equipment, utilizing public ways, and incurring debt. The law also creates a three-member elected Board of Water Commissioners. All of the authority granted to the Town under this act is vested in the Board of Water Commissioners “who shall be subject, however, to such instructions, rules and regulations as said town may impose”.

In 1994, the Town Meeting adopted section 69B of Chapter 41 of the Massachusetts General Laws. This law was adopted primarily to establish a special fund for the Water Department. However, it also clarified that the water commissioners shall have “exclusive charge and control of the water department and the water system.”

The Town has adopted a local by-law regulating the Board of Water Commissioners that is consistent with prior actions of the Town. Incorporated as Article 7 of the General By-Laws of the Town of Belmont, the by-law has eight sections outlining the authority and responsibilities of the Board of Water Commissioners. The only significant provision that is not otherwise established in the previously mentioned laws is the requirement of the Board of Water Commissioners to have proposed water rates approved by the Board of Selectmen.

### **Cemetery Services**

In 1898, the Town adopted the provisions of sections 22 through 26 of Chapter 114 of the Massachusetts General Laws. These sections establish a three-member elected Board of Cemetery Commissioners and vests “sole care, superintendence and management” of all burial grounds. The law also permits the Board to grant deeds for burial rights and to accept gifts as legal trusts.

The Town has adopted a local by-law regulating the Board of Cemetery Commissioners consistent with prior actions of the Town. Incorporated as Article 10 of the General By-Laws of the Town of Belmont, the by-law has ten sections outlining the authority and responsibilities of the Board of Cemetery Commissioners. Section 4 of the Article requires the Board to appoint a cemetery superintendent.

Not addressed by state law or the Town By-Laws is the recent action of Town Meeting regarding new burial space and adjacent public open space authorized through the Town’s Memorandum of Agreement (MOA) with McLean Hospital Corporation. A specific section of the MOA regulates the development of new cemetery land. In addition, a member of the Board of Cemetery Commissioners is a member of the new McLean Land Management Committee, which has certain legal responsibility for the public open space created by the transaction.

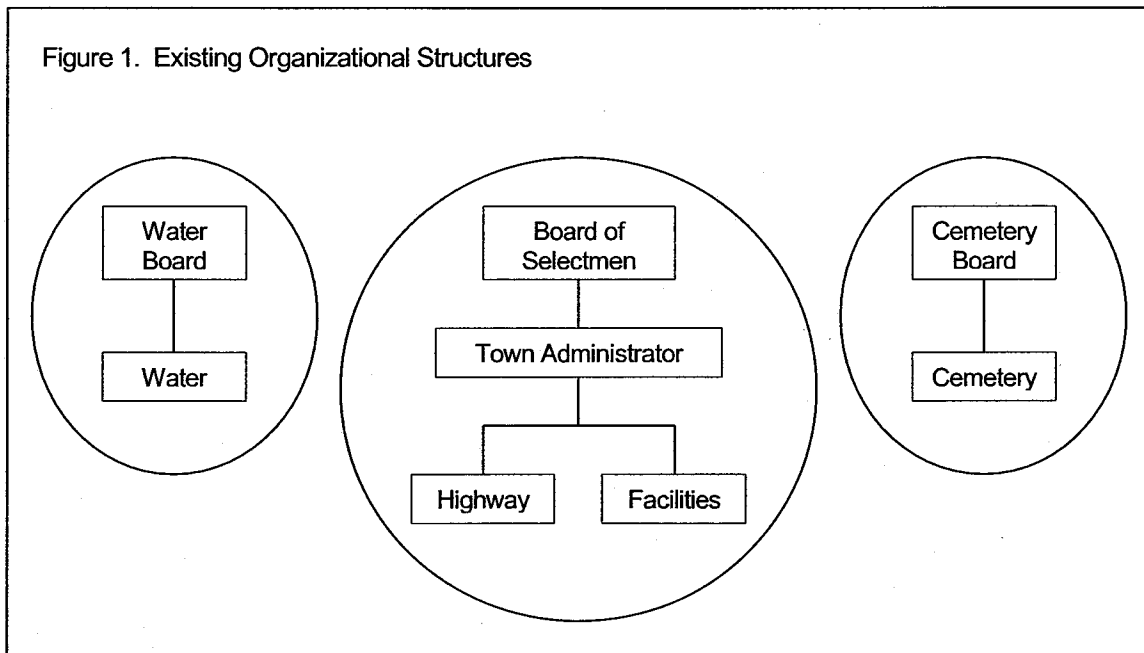
### **Comparable Communities**

We conducted interviews with public works directors in six comparable Massachusetts communities with public works departments to learn about their organizational structures, governance, staffing levels and budgetary resources. These communities included the towns of Arlington, Brookline, Lexington, Watertown, Wellesley, and Winchester. A chart summarizing key information from this analysis can be found at Appendix D.

## Organizational History and Background

### Existing Organization

Currently, the Town has three separate and independent Boards with jurisdiction over four distinct departments providing public works services (see Figure 1 below). Under the jurisdiction of an independently elected Water Board is the Water Department, which is responsible for the distribution of water throughout the Town. Under the jurisdiction of the Cemetery Board is the Cemetery Department responsible for the operations and maintenance of the Town's cemetery on Grove Street and a future cemetery on a portion of the former McLean Hospital land. Under the jurisdiction of the Board of Selectmen and direction of the Town Administrator are the Highway Department and the Buildings and Facilities Department. The Highway Department is responsible for street maintenance, sewer and stormwater maintenance, central vehicle maintenance, forestry services, deltas and grounds maintenance, and oversight of the privatized solid waste and recycling services. The Buildings and Facilities Department is responsible for the maintenance of and custodial services for the Town's buildings and maintenance of the Town's recreational facilities and fields.



### Water Department

The Town's Water Department is responsible for the distribution of safe drinking water throughout the Town. Under the daily management of a Water Superintendent, department staff maintain the Town's water distribution; oversee the water main replacement program (currently entering its ninth year); respond to emergency water main breaks and other requests for service; conduct fire hydrant flushings and install replacement fire hydrants; install, maintain and read water meters; bill and collect payment for water and sewer services; and provide data to the Massachusetts Water Resources Authority, the supplier of the Town's water. To accomplish these tasks the department

currently is budgeted for three Water Commissioners and sixteen full-time equivalent positions, utilizes fourteen pieces of major equipment, and has an operating budget of nearly \$4 million. The Water Department has its own facility and is located at 35 Woodland Street

### **Highway Department**

The Town's Highway Department is the largest and most diverse of the four departments, performing the following functions:

*Street Maintenance.* The Highway Department maintains, cleans and provides signs for more than 80 miles of public and private roads. This includes street sweeping, repairing roads and sidewalks, striping lines and crosswalks, and clearing the roadways and major sidewalks of ice and snow.

*Sanitary Sewer Maintenance.* Labor staff routinely maintains and cleans sanitary sewer main pipes as well as services the Town's two sewer pumping stations. In addition, staff respond to emergency service requests related to sewer failures and sewer back-ups.

*Storm Drain Maintenance.* The Highway Department oversees the annual contract cleaning of catch basins and its personnel maintain all catch basins, manholes, and 54 miles of main lines. The department also responds to all flooding events.

*Central Vehicle Maintenance.* Since 1981, the Highway Department has managed a central motor vehicle repair and maintenance facility. The significant majority of Town-owned vehicle and equipment are serviced by the department's four mechanics, including the Town's public safety vehicles.

*Deltas and Grounds Maintenance.* The Highway Department is responsible for 52 various deltas, islands, and grounds, including most of the land around Clay Pit Pond. All these areas are annually cleaned and routinely maintained by highway laborers.

*Forestry Service.* Under the direction of the Tree Warden, the Highway Department plants, maintains, and removes public shade trees.

*Solid Waste Collection and Disposal.* The Highway Department oversees the contracts and agreements related to the recycling, collection and disposal of the Town's solid waste.

The Highway Department accomplishes these tasks with a staff of 30 personnel, a fleet of 49 vehicles and major equipment, and a budget of nearly \$10 million. The office of the Highway Department is located temporarily in the Light Department building at 40 Prince Street, which is adjacent to the Highway Yard, which is the operational base for the labor staff and major equipment and is where vehicles are stored.

### **Buildings and Facilities Department**

The Buildings and Facilities Department provides building maintenance and custodial services to all of the Town's buildings (with the exception of the school department and the public library buildings). In addition, department staff provides facilities maintenance services to all of the Town's recreational facilities (e.g., pool and rink), playgrounds, and athletic fields.

