

“Vote for New All-Alcohol Licenses”

Belmont Citizen-Herald, March 25, 2004

Guest Perspective by Jennifer Page and Sara Oaklander

We strongly urge voters to vote "YES" on Question 2 On Monday April 5. The question proposes that Belmont make available full-alcohol licenses for up to three restaurants, each of which must have seating capacity for 130 – 250 patrons.

These licenses can contribute substantially to new growth and to the revitalization of our business centers. Also, residents have expressed their strong interest in having more places and a greater variety of places to dine in Belmont.

Under current regulations, the Board of Selectmen is authorized to grant up to eight licenses for the sale of beer and wine in restaurants having between 39 and 125 seats. Those licenses, and their restrictions, would remain in place.

The idea of all-alcohol licenses was originally proposed by the South Pleasant Street Land Use Committee in 1996 as a tool to attract to that area a high quality restaurant which, in turn, could draw and anchor attractive retail and possibly office development. Six years later the Vision 21 Implementation Committee, in our “business friendly” forums, heard emphatically from members of Belmont’s business community that more varied and higher-end restaurants in our town would help revitalize the business districts by providing “destinations” and by attracting related businesses and more foot traffic to the area.

Residents are also supportive of the idea. A survey conducted last fall by BEDPG (the Business and Economic Development Planning Group) revealed that many residents favor the retail/restaurant mix of near-by towns and that they want more places in Belmont for dining out, particularly favoring family-style restaurants and “fine dining” establishments. It is generally understood that full alcohol licensing is essential if we want to attract a greater variety of restaurants to Belmont.

Why is full alcohol licensing essential to attracting larger and “high end” restaurants? The economic reality is that such restaurants are often faced with substantial build-out costs, which can be greater than \$750k for a "white tablecloth" restaurant seating at least 100. This means that the owner must maximize revenue sources in order to be profitable. For independent restaurants, competition from the large chains compounds the problem. The sale of alcoholic beverages is considered essential to favorable profit margins.

In fact, experts have told us unequivocally that no restaurant developer will even look at a site unless full-alcohol licensing is already available. Michael Staub, Belmont resident and small-business consultant specializing in restaurants, puts it this way: “In order to attract an owner-operated, independent restaurant that will be comparable to independent restaurants in abutting communities, a full liquor license is an absolute requirement.”

Some people worry, “How big is a restaurant with 130 – 250 seating capacity?” Belmont’s largest restaurant, Patou, in Belmont Center, has seating capacity of 120. Bertucci’s at Alewife seats 146, Jimmy’s in Arlington seats 158; Not Your Average Joe’s in Watertown seats 180.

We’ve been asked, “Where could we put three such restaurants? Pleasant Street, maybe... Where else?” We don’t have the answer to that. Properties become available at unexpected times. We should regard the three licenses as planning tools. Belmont needs to have in place licensing opportunities so that restaurant developers will consider Belmont as a possible location. As a town, we must look to the future and put in place the necessary building blocks.

Some residents fear increased public drunkenness and other undesirable social consequences. Limiting the licenses to eating establishments and vigorously enforcing regulations are effective in maintaining appropriate public conduct in other towns and will be the case in Belmont. It is reasonable to expect that the proposed new licenses will provoke no harm.

Belmont is just embarking on this process. Neighboring towns have had such licenses for years and are gradually revising their ideas about what will work for their town. In Belmont, we hope to attract new restaurants, with many positive results for us as residents and for our business community. Is the proposal perfect? Probably not, but over time, we will learn from the experience and make adjustments as we feel the need.

Town Meeting passed this proposal in April 2003 by a very large margin. We hope that you will help to ensure its passage in the referendum. Please join us by voting “YES” on Question 2 on April 5.

(Jennifer Page, a resident of Stanley Road, is Chair of the Vision 21 Implementation Committee; Sara Oaklander, a resident of Farnham St., is Chair of the Business and Economic Development Planning Group.)