

# **Business and Economic Development Planning Group**

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## **Final Report and Recommendations**

**March 2005**

**Presented to the  
Belmont Board of Selectmen  
Paul Solomon, Chair  
Will Brownsberger  
Angelo Firenze**

**March 28, 2005**

## **Business and Economic Development Planning Group (BEDPG)**

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## **I. INTRODUCTION AND BACKGROUND**

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The Business and Economic Development Planning Group (BEDPG) was founded in September 2002 at a time when business development had become a renewed focus of concern and action for the Town of Belmont. During this time, the Office of Community Development had started its work with the Cecil Group on the Trapelo Road/Belmont Street Corridor Study with a goal of creating an economic development plan for the Corridor that would have relevance to the Town as a whole. And the Vision Implementation Committee (VIC) was exploring the question, “Is Belmont Business Friendly?”

About this time, Selectman Paul Solomon was advocating for Belmont to take a more proactive approach to planning. With Dr. Solomon’s participation, the VIC designed a model to create and oversee work groups that would be charged with planning to move the Town forward to achieve various aspects of the Working Vision for Belmont’s Future. The first of these work groups was BEDPG, which was formed to begin to address the parts of Belmont’s vision statement which touch on our business community.

BEDPG began meeting in October 2002 and our mandate was finalized by the Board of Selectmen in December 2002 (see below and attached). Our focus was defined both by the discussions that were held regarding this mandate and by specific charges that resulted from the VIC’s recommendations to the Board of Selectman stemming from its “business friendly” initiative.

### **BEDPG’s Mandate (excerpts)**

**Introduction:** The Working Vision for Belmont’s Future contains the following statements:

- “Thriving business centers contribute economic stability while offering places for residents to dine, shop and socialize.”
- “We will work with neighborhoods and residents to identify and support retail needs and opportunities.”
- “We will preserve our small-town community atmosphere.”

In addition, we recognize that while Belmont’s tax revenues come almost completely from residential properties, the business community plays an important role in supporting the continued financial viability of our town.

**Mandate:** The mandate for the Business and Economic Development Planning Group will be to develop recommendations for:

- facilitating the opening of new businesses;
- attracting desirable new businesses;
- preserving and enhancing current businesses.

**Composition:** The group will include representatives of the following:

- The Vision Implementation Committee (VIC)
- The Planning Board
- The Zoning Board of Appeals
- The Long-Range Financial Planning Committee
- The Fair Housing Committee (now the Belmont Housing Trust)
- Representatives of all the Town’s business areas
- The Belmont-Watertown Chamber of Commerce

- Others, as recommended by the Planning Group and the VIC

Additional elements covered the process that would launch and sustain the work of the group.

The composition of the group, as described above, was notable in that it represented the first time that a Town committee was mandated to include business representatives.

## **Membership**

BEDPG's membership varied over the two years of our work. Some of the people who were initially appointed or who initially agreed to participate chose not to continue their involvement and/or not to become active members. Some became active members who contributed to the group's accomplishments and others were members in name only. These conditions, combined with an ambitious mandate and agenda, compromised our ability to engage as fully in the work as we believed was warranted. You will see this reality reflected in Section VII of this report where we detail our accomplishments and findings with regard to specific areas of study and projects.

## II. LESSONS LEARNED

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As we worked to engage the Town (residents, business representatives, staff) in discussions about business revitalization, we found that there was great interest in and enthusiasm for the topic, combined with a healthy amount of skepticism. There is a well-established belief among many that Belmont – as a “Town of Homes” – has never been supportive of its business community and never will be. Others believe that things can change; indeed, that they must change in order for Belmont to maintain its appeal to residents – old and new alike. We found that both groups of people – the skeptical and the hopeful – were eager to share their concerns and ideas for improvement.

As we dug deeper into the issues, we found there was little interest in discussing specific ways for the Town to “preserve and enhance current businesses,” as is stated in our mandate, without first addressing the more systemic and policy-level issues that affect how the Town relates to its business community. BEDPG’s consideration of these more overarching issues led us to the following conclusions:

- **Leadership:** There are some tough decisions that need to be made – and actions to be taken – regarding the Town’s commitment to creating a more favorable business climate. Making these decisions and taking action will require strong leadership, including a commitment to finding a balance between business interests and neighborhood and individual concerns. A strategic effort needs to be made to shift the view of at least some residents who are disinclined toward business revitalization because of their attachment to Belmont as the “Town of Homes.” It is incumbent upon Town leadership to educate residents regarding the benefits that will accrue to the Town and individual homeowners as a result of business revitalization. And in the case of those who remain unconvinced, Town leadership must be willing to take a firm stand to do what’s best for the community as a whole.
- **Vision:** It is essential that the Town, building on the relevant elements of A Working Vision for Belmont’s Future, develop a clear vision for business revitalization in Belmont, along with a plan for achieving that vision. This clear vision will provide the framework and context that will be necessary for Town leadership to successfully take the firm stand that will be required in the face of scattered opposition. A clear vision is also an essential first step toward formulating specific goals and objectives that will lead to the implementation of changes that move us toward our vision. The plan must include strategies for creating a climate in town that is more supportive of our local business community and allows for the kind of business development that would be most desirable for residents and most beneficial to the Town.

**Without these changes, Belmont will continue to miss critical opportunities for business revitalization.** We may not know exactly what will happen if we do nothing, but we can be pretty sure that if we do nothing, we will never realize our vision. Raising kids provides a useful analogy: kids will grow up into adults, no matter what we do. But the more we engage with them, guide them, provide them with positive encouragement, the more likely it is that they’ll grow up into the kind of adults we want them to be. One could argue the same is true for our business districts – if we do nothing, they’ll probably still be with us. But if we take action, we may turn them into something of which we are truly proud.

### III. The Community Benefits of Business Revitalization

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Belmont's focus on business revitalization grew out of the Town's vision statement: "A Working Vision for Belmont's Future," which was adopted by Town Meeting in April 2001 and includes these statements: *Thriving business centers contribute economic stability while offering places for residents to dine, shop, and socialize* and *We will work with neighborhoods and residents to identify and support retail needs and opportunities*. Perhaps the most salient summary of the benefits of business appeared in the Belmont Citizen-Herald in February 2003 in a guest perspective written by our Vision 21 Implementation Committee, the parent organization of the Business and Economic Development Planning Group. This article detailed the contributions our business community makes to the welfare of our town.

- ***Sense of community*** – Thriving business centers contribute to building a sense of community by providing public places where people meet – accidentally or by intention. Frequent but casual encounters are critical to the informal building of mutual interests, reinforcement of personal ties, and the exchange of information and news among residents. A sense of community is vital to our town's welfare and future. It inspires in its residents willing volunteerism, a commitment to address local issues, a sense of connectedness and shared responsibility for one another as individuals and, in a larger sense, for our collective welfare.
- ***Convenience*** – The greater the range of commercial ventures and services near to our homes, the easier it is to manage the essential tasks of daily living.
- ***Aesthetics*** – Well-planned, attractive commercial areas can be aesthetically pleasing in their own right. The visual impact of an inviting street landscape makes the experience of simply being there a satisfying one. Thoughtfully designed clusters of buildings, of a scale appropriate to the town, can also be visually pleasing and lend character to the commercial area. Attractive commercial areas engender a sense of civic pride in the residents and are good for business and good for the town.
- ***Revenue*** – Thriving business areas contribute to town revenue in both taxes and fees. Empty buildings and shops generate lower taxes and fees than do occupied ones.
- ***Property values*** – Thriving business areas contribute to the town by maintaining or helping to increase property values. Prospective homeowners are drawn to communities with bustling, inviting shopping areas.
- ***Reputation of the town*** – A town with active business centers communicates important messages to its citizens and to outsiders. The town is perceived as having pride in itself, a commitment to comprehensive planning, and good town services. Such a reputation attracts good new businesses as well as good new residents.
- ***Good neighbors*** - The business owners in Belmont, most especially those who manage their own stores, make wonderful neighbors. They contribute generously to town causes both financially and in goods and services. They build personal and caring relationships with customers. They contribute time and energy to public events, which is good for the businesses themselves and good for the town as a whole.

## **IV. The Financial Benefits of Business Revitalization**

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In addition to the community benefits cited above, many are of the opinion that there are also financial benefits to be realized from an investment in business revitalization. However, BEDPG found that specific projections supporting this viewpoint have not been developed. Given the fiscal challenges we face here in Belmont, we believe that it is crucial to investigate any possible improvement to our base and revenue stream that might result if all commercial properties in Town were fully developed, fully utilized, well maintained, and housed thriving businesses.

Appreciating the importance of this question and the divergent opinions by those who speculate about it, BEDPG attempted to gather this information – primarily from the Town assessor, who estimates that about 10% of Belmont’s commercial properties (30 out of 240) are underutilized. However, he was unable to engage with us in the development of assumptions and hypothetical projections for this purpose.

Although other people with whom we worked proposed various creative ideas for how to structure such a study, after considerable deliberation we accepted the fact that BEDPG had not been charged with conducting financial analysis. We also determined that our membership was not designed to include the expertise that would be necessary to tackle these issues with any degree of sophistication. We agreed instead to proceed with our work on the basis of the commonly held assumption that fully developed and well-maintained commercial properties housing thriving businesses are worth more to the Town than under-developed, under-utilized, and/or poorly maintained properties.

We are sufficiently impressed with the importance of this financial analysis that we include a recommendation to that effect below. The result of this analysis will provide the town with objective data about the financial benefits of business revitalization that can then be paired with our understanding of the more intangible benefits. This financial analysis should be accomplished as an early step in our efforts to move ahead with the objectives and priorities laid out in this report.

We leave it to others in town with greater expertise in these areas to determine how best to conduct this analysis. We think a primary challenge of the work will be to reach agreement on a set of underlying assumptions. Regardless of how the analysis is approached, the outcome is important if only to lay the question to rest. If the outcome demonstrates that an investment in business revitalization will increase Town revenues this will serve to significantly bolster the Town’s commitment to this cause. We urge that such an analysis be undertaken, as stated in recommendation #2 on page 11.

## V. A Strategic Investment in Business Revitalization

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*It is a clear and convincing finding by BEDPG that a strategic focus on business revitalization is essential if Belmont is to realize the kind of positive changes in our business community that are being envisioned and articulated with increasing frequency and fervor.*

There are three interrelated dynamics influencing the success of our business revitalization efforts – the public sector, the private, sector, and the market economy – however, we don't have control to the same extent over each of these. Belmont's challenge is to exert considered and targeted influence where we can.

The public sector – the Town of Belmont – includes our elected leaders, appointed members of Town committees (residents) and Town employees. This is the area over which the Town has the most control. Our elected leaders, in cooperation and consultation with Town residents and employees, can develop a vision for our business community and a strategy for realizing that vision, and provide the direction and leadership that will allow for the successful implementation of that strategy.

The private sector – Belmont's property and business owners – is an area over which the Town has limited control through legal and regulatory systems and an area in which we can strategically exert some influence by providing stimulation and motivation.

The market economy influences our business sector to a considerable extent – some suggest it's the only meaningful force. Yet it is also the one area over which the Town has no control.

An effective investment in business revitalization will be one in which the Town strategically engages our public and private sectors in working collaboratively towards a shared set of goals and objectives. This kind of investment in business revitalization will require resources to coordinate the various relevant initiatives that are already underway and to provide the programs and incentives that will encourage the private sector's cooperation.

An investment in business revitalization will have a financial component and will require time and attention from Town staff, citizen leadership, and other volunteers. The progress that is made will be a direct reflection of the extent of that commitment. The more the Town invests, the more we will be able to accomplish.

A strategic investment in business development will allow us to:

- increase tax revenues through higher assessed values that result from property improvements, successful businesses, and low vacancy rates.
- tap into the professional expertise that exists in the field so that we can build on the best practices and experience of other communities.
- research and access technical assistance and funding opportunities available through federal, state, and private sources. A variety of assistance is available for business center revitalization and in support of individual businesses. For example, the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development has a Downtown Initiative offering technical assistance through site visits and other mechanisms, and there are Small Business Development Centers throughout the state that offer free consulting to local businesses. These and other resources require a commitment of time to identify, research, and apply for assistance.

- take advantage of the business opportunities that will be created by the nearby housing, office, and R&D developments that will come on line in the next five to ten years in and around Belmont (McLean, MetState, Uplands, Cambridge Discovery Park, etc.). These new developments will result in a significant increase in the local residential and commercial population – resulting in an expanded trade area for Belmont. It is in Belmont’s interests to be prepared to take advantage of these increases in any and all ways in which positive impact can be derived from this growth. An increase in activity in Belmont’s business districts is one of those ways.

## VI. Recommendations

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**BEDPG recommends that Belmont commit to business revitalization by implementing the following four-point plan:**

- 1. Business Development Officer** – Retain the services of a Business Development Officer (BDO) on a part-time contractual basis. Provide her/him with the resources and authority to act on behalf of the Town to advance a specific set of business development objectives (see below), including demonstrating and documenting the benefits of a commitment to business development.

As a way of demonstrating the costs involved with this investment, we estimate that progress can begin to be made with a minimum investment of resources of fifteen to twenty hours per week at a contract rate of \$50 per hour.

This investment in professional business development expertise will be an essential ingredient in the success of Belmont's business revitalization efforts in that the Town will have the means to focus on business revitalization in a way that has not previously been possible. The BDO will bring to bear on the job a set of skills and experience that will enable her/him to:

- identify and understand the interests and perspective of the business community and ensure those views are represented in town decision making;
- advocate for the health and well-being of our business community;
- bring an informed focus to and provide a point of contact for our business districts;
- combine retail/business expertise with an understanding of the local political process;
- bring together prospective new businesses with landlords seeking new commercial tenants;
- garner resources to support our business districts;
- engage all the players in an effort to find shared interests and common ground to increase the likelihood of success;
- help us achieve a more cooperative relationship between our public and private sectors; and
- coordinate the efforts of the many groups and individuals (the Office of Community Development, the Planning Board, BEDPG, consultants, various study groups, etc.) who have developed an understanding of the challenges and opportunities before us, including finding the common ground among the various findings of these groups.

- 2. Financial Benefits Analysis** – Conduct an analysis of the financial benefits of this investment in business development based on the development of reasonable assumptions and projections regarding expenses and revenues.
- 3. Technical Assistance** – Budget additional funds to provide the BDO with the resources necessary to build a strong foundation for ongoing business development in Belmont. Thorough market analysis, including an analysis of the current business landscape in Belmont, for example, will allow the program to be supported by objective data and criteria.
- 4. Business Development Committee** - Create a standing business development committee that includes citizens and substantial representation from the business community (business representatives who are not required to be town residents). Charge this committee with working in collaboration with and acting in support of the BDO's efforts to advance a specific set of business development objectives. The membership of the committee should include a diverse representation of business owners (geography, type of business, etc.), commercial property owners, and residents. Members – both business representatives and citizens – must be committed individuals who are

willing to actively contribute their time, expertise, and services through hands-on involvement in the work of the committee.

BEDPG has surfaced an ambitious list of challenges for the BDO to tackle in collaboration with the Business Development Committee. In order to make the most out of the Town's investment in this plan, BEDPG recommends that the following objectives be adopted as the charge for the Business Development Officer and Business Development Committee, that the BDO and Business Development Committee prioritize these objectives to guide their efforts, and that sufficient resources (authority and budget) to accomplish these objectives be made available.

- a) Work with staff of the Office of Community Development and with the Planning Board to integrate the findings of this report with the findings of the Cecil Group's Economic Development Study, taking into consideration the MIT Corridor Study and other relevant studies, and to develop plans for proceeding with implementation.
- b) Work with the staff of the Office of Community Development and with the Planning Board to follow through on revisions to the zoning by-law and improvements to the permitting process to reflect the Town's vision for its business community and the goal of creating a more favorable climate in town for businesses.
- c) Subcontract for the gathering and analysis of existing market data and for market analysis to provide objective data and develop objective criteria in support of a more favorable business climate and in support of creating conditions likely to foster success.
- d) Collaborate and build relationships with property owners to develop a shared vision of a more favorable business climate in Belmont – one that meets the interests of both the Town and the property owners; develop ways to work collaboratively with property owners to realize that vision.
- e) Develop and implement plans to most effectively avail ourselves of the programs and services offered by the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development.
- f) Collaborate with property owners on the recruitment of new tenants; offer incentives to entice landlords to rent their properties to the kinds of businesses that are most likely to thrive, that would fill gaps and create synergy in our business districts, and that would meet the interests of Belmont residents, based on the results of the BEDPG survey.
- g) Participate in the development and implementation of design standards and guidelines for property maintenance and improvements; offer incentives to property owners to improve their properties.
- h) Participate in the development and implementation of standards regarding vacant properties; create disincentives for owners who leave their properties vacant.
- i) Participate in the development and implementation of plans for funding and making streetscape improvements to our business districts in order to attract more people to those districts.

## Additional Recommendations

**In addition to the four-point plan outlined above, BEDPG recommends the following actions.**

Detailed explanation of and rationale for each of these recommendations is provided in Section VII of this report (beginning on page 14) in which we discuss BEDPG's specific areas of study and activities that we undertook in response to the charges that were made to us by the Board of Selectmen.

5. **Business Advocacy:** BEDPG recommends that the Business Development Officer and the Business Development Committee determine how the Town can better support current businesses and promote its business community by working with other stakeholders (e.g., business representatives and advocates, Town officials) to generate ideas, consider both new and existing proposals, and implement the highest priority action steps. **See section VI-B, page 18.**
6. **Business Tracking:** BEDPG recommends that the Business Development Officer, with the support of the Office of Community Development, assume responsibility for the further development and the maintenance of the early iteration of the database of businesses. **See section VI-C, page 19.**
7. **Liquor Licensing:** BEDPG recommends that the Business Development Officer and Office of Community Development take advantage of the availability of full alcohol licensing by encouraging the development of additional restaurant activity in Town through the development and implementation of a specific set of steps. These steps should include the identification of suitable properties, facilitation of necessary zoning changes, and the development and implementation of a marketing plan for these properties. **See section VI-D, page 20.**
8. **Parking:** BEDPG recommends consideration of the recommendations detailed in the attached parking memorandum. **See section VI-E, page 21 and Appendix E.**
9. **Permitting:** BEDPG recommends that Office of Community Development staff be reassigned the task of reviewing and upgrading the operational aspects of permitting and licensing for businesses in order to ensure that the relevant practices and procedures are as clear, transparent, and user-friendly as they can be. In order to accomplish this, representative users must be involved in the review process. **See section VI-F, page 22.**
10. **Snow Removal:** BEDPG recommends that the Director of Public Works, in collaboration with the Business Development Officer and Office of Community Development, develop a mechanism to engage commercial property owners on an ongoing basis in the challenge of timely adequate snow removal from areas where businesses are located; enforce the existing regulations in order to increase compliance; rebuild the Town's capacity to address the challenge of adequate and timely snow removal in areas of town where businesses are located. **See section VI-G, pages 24.**
11. **Trash Removal:** BEDPG recommends that the Business Development Officer develop and market a group rate trash removal program for businesses at a later date once the Town has established itself as a good working partner of businesses. **See section VI-H, page 26.**
12. **Vision: Town-wide Survey:** BEDPG recommends that the results of this survey be used to inform the efforts of the Business Development Officer and the Business Development Committee to work collaboratively with property owners to attract desirable new businesses. **See section VI-I, page 27.**
13. **Waverly Square Fire Station:** BEDPG recommends full implementation of the recommendations of the Waverley Square Fire Station Re-Use Committee. **See section VI-J, page 28.**

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## VII. Specific Areas of Study and Activities

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In this section, we review and summarize each of BEDPG's areas of study and activities we undertook in response to the charges that were made to us by the Board of Selectmen.

### A. Marketing and Business Development – Our Main Focus

This area had the potential to encompass many aspects of our work. Originally, the charge of this area was defined as follows:

- 1. Attract desirable new businesses:** Assess the kinds of businesses that currently exist and thrive in Town and the kinds of businesses likely to thrive in Town. Determine the role the Town can play in attracting desirable new businesses.
- 2. Examine and cultivate role of commercial property and business owners:** Determine how to involve property and business owners in fostering desirable business development and ensuring that commercial properties are well-maintained and visually attractive. Determine how the Town can work collaboratively with property and business owners to achieve these goals.

Over time we came to view this area as particularly central to our mandate. The disposition and condition of commercial property is largely in the hands of the property owners, but it is a commonly held belief that there is a role for the Town to play in this arena. How to define that role and create the resources to implement it emerged as a key issue in BEDPG. Various questions were surfaced: What are the Town's policies and practices that impact on commercial property and business owners? How is the Town perceived by commercial property and business owners? What is their willingness to work collaboratively with the Town? What resources does the Town have to bring to bear on any collaboration (i.e., what does the Town have to offer)? What is the Town's philosophy and what will its policies be with regard to the role commercial properties and businesses play in the life of the Town? Once that is determined, to what lengths is the Town willing to go to address identified problems and weaknesses related achieving this vision?

During the time we spent exploring these issues, we learned that there is a sizeable field of study in this area that has the potential to provide considerable guidance on policies and practices. For example, some of us were exposed to related details at the Downtown Workshops sponsored by the Massachusetts Department of Housing and Community Development.

This is an area of BEDPG activity that was compromised by a lack of consistent volunteer commitment. Many of the initiatives proposed and discussed early on were not pursued due to a lack of volunteer leadership and participation.

It is also an area in which relationship-building is central. We came to understand that the Town needs to have representatives who can be in relationship with commercial property and business owners. This is key to the Town's ability to find common ground with these representatives of the private sector.

We also came to realize that real progress on the development of relationships with commercial property and business owners can only be made by someone with Town authority and resources. Unless one brings resources to the table (policy influence, financial incentives for property improvements, etc.), it may not be possible to gain the attention of commercial property owners in Town or to influence their decision-making and therefore the disposition of their properties. This relates to the status of distressed buildings, abandoned properties, vacant storefronts, and more.

## What we tried and what we accomplished

*Inventory of existing businesses* – An inventory of businesses in Belmont Center was developed in an effort to begin an analysis of under- and over-represented business categories.

*Research of other towns* – Some data gathering from other towns did take place, although not to the extent that we had initially intended. The information we did gather is provided in Appendix D.

*Relationships with property and business owners* – We set out to explore the role the Town can play in attracting desirable new businesses and how the Town can work collaboratively with commercial property owners to achieve shared objectives. Numerous work group meetings were held, as were informal conversations with business and property owners and developers. One particular focus was how best to intervene when a commercial property is vacant. In a few cases, we tried contacting property owners to engage in a dialogue about the disposition of their properties. The primary outcome of these efforts was a heightened awareness of the need to have authority to act on behalf of the Town and resources to incentivize property owners to take action that would allow for achievement of shared objectives (e.g., renting vacant space to a particular kind of tenant, property improvements to enhance a business districts, etc.).

A formal meeting with business and property owners and developers was held in November 2003. The goal was to bring this group of business leaders up-to-date on what Belmont was doing to become more business friendly and to begin a dialogue with the business community about the issues before BEDPG. More than a dozen invited guests attended and participated in a wide-ranging discussion about the challenges facing Belmont's business community – both historically and currently – and what might be done to begin to overcome these challenges. A significant amount of skepticism that the Town of Belmont would ever change its attitudes and practices toward the local business community was expressed by those present and implied, we were told, by the absence of others. While no specific consensus or agreements emerged from this discussion, we were encouraged by the participation and the emerging confidence that positive change could be achieved.

A follow up mailing was sent to these business leaders and others to inform them of the availability of the survey results and to encourage their comments and feedback (none was received).

It was also our intention to do further follow up to provide an update on changes to permitting procedures and proposed changes to the zoning by-law – both as a way of staying in touch and of further engaging this group in advocating for positive change that would benefit the business community. This follow up effort did not happen due to the limits of our volunteer resources.

*Business representation* – It became clear early on that businesses in Belmont lack adequate representation. As BEDPG became known throughout the community, we were repeatedly approached to speak on behalf of Belmont businesses, which we were unprepared to do and which we did not understand to be a part of our mandate. Over the years there have been active business associations in the three main business districts, but only one of those (Belmont Center) remains at all active today. Although the Watertown/Belmont Chamber of Commerce does welcome members from Belmont, we learned that the Chamber's presence in Belmont is limited and that many of its Belmont members are sole practitioners. We also learned that the Chamber is focused on servicing its current members more than it is on outreach beyond that membership, unless that outreach is specifically oriented to new member recruitment. This would explain, for example, the Chambers' lack of interest in making working with BEDPG to facilitate the development of a new Cushing Square business association a priority.

However, through the efforts of BEDPG members affiliated with the Watertown/Belmont Chamber of Commerce, the Chamber attended some BEDPG meetings and followed our activities. We encouraged the Chamber to re-engage more actively in Belmont and, as a result, the Chamber sponsored a forum in April 2004 for business people to learn about the results of the Belmont Street/Trapelo Road Corridor Study and agreed to explore sponsorship of a trash removal program for Belmont businesses.

*Intervention in leasing decisions* - The notion that the Town could influence the development and leasing decisions made by property owners was one that BEDPG intended to explore in full but ultimately only dabbled in – again due to our resource constraints. On a few occasions, BEDPG members engaged in discussions with property owners regarding their development plans and intentions and/or their leasing decisions. For example, on a few occasions property owners/managers were approached about property vacancies. BEDPG provided these individuals with information gleaned from the BEDPG survey regarding what kinds of new businesses residents would find most desirable. In one case, BEDPG chair Sara Oaklander had a lengthy conversation with a property owner and, on that basis, approached a business with the idea of opening a branch in Belmont. Although this particular attempt did not realize any results, it did shed some light on the potential role the Town could play in marketing the Town to prospective new businesses, and it educated us as to the potential for success and the need for someone with appropriate expertise to pursue this area of activity.

In addition, BEDPG identified “distressed buildings” as an area for Town intervention with tremendous positive potential. While there is a commonly heard refrain from Town residents that “there must be something we can do” about one property or another, we did not have the capacity to fully explore the Town’s options for this kind of intervention. We did, however, take on the case of the disposition of the Waverley Square Fire Station (see separate section), although this case was unique in that it involved a Town-owned distressed building rather than a privately held property.

Another aspect of “distressed buildings” that we were not able to explore fully has to do with how existing buildings are maintained and, in some cases, improved and the extent to which the actions (or inactions) of property owners are consistent with the Town’s vision for a particular area.

Again, the primary outcome of our efforts to explore relationships with property and business owners was a heightened awareness of the need to have authority to act on behalf of the Town and resources to incentivize property owners to take action that would allow for achievement of shared objectives (e.g., renting vacant space to a particular kind of tenant, property improvements to enhance a business district, etc.).

### **Recommendations:**

Recommendations pertaining to this area of our work are outlined in the four-point business revitalization plan detailed above as our primary recommendation.

## **B. Business Advocacy (see recommendation #5)**

During its “business friendly” forums, the Vision Implementation Committee heard from many business owners and representatives who perceive the Town as not offering support to its business community, to existing, new and prospective business owners, and to their self-promoting activities.

BEDPG was charged with investigating and developing the business advocacy ideas generated at the VIC business friendly forums and develop recommendations for how to effectively “preserve and enhance current businesses,” as stated in our mandate. This was an area that we believed might offer us the opportunity for what was described as a “quick and early win” – one that might earn us the confidence of the business community. However, an early effort to identify someone to lead BEDPG’s work in this area was not successful. As a result, it was not until near the end of BEDPG’s tenure that the full group turned its attention to exploring the ideas generated by the VIC’s business friendly forums. When we did turn our attention to this charge, we found that interest in discussing specific ways for the Town to “preserve and enhance current businesses” was limited by the more pressing need of the Town to address the higher level policy issues that set the stage for how the Town relates to its business community.

### **Recommendation:**

Once the policy issues have been taken up and there is general agreement that sufficient progress has been made, BEDPG recommends that the Business Development Officer and the Business Development Committee determine the specific ways the Town can better support current businesses and promote its business community by working with other stakeholders (e.g., business representatives and advocates, Town officials) to generate ideas, consider both new and existing proposals (see list below), and implement the highest priority action steps.

- Create mentors or advocates to guide business owners through the Town’s permitting and licensing processes. Consider tapping retired business people to act as mentors/advocates.
- Facilitate newspaper and cable TV coverage to promote both new and continuing businesses.
- Expand Town Day to include all business districts.
- Reintroduce the Cushing Square/Trapelo Road “Fall Festival.”
- Develop and implement a “Buy Belmont” campaign to encourage residents to do business locally.
- Include business owners on Town committees to ensure inclusion of the business perspective in Town affairs.
- Develop and implement ways to use the Town’s website to promote local businesses.
- Offer business assistance programs and services to local businesses (e.g., operations, market analysis, retailing). Link local businesses with existing regional, state and federal assistance programs.
- Highlight successful properties to other property owners in order to encourage similar practices.
- Develop and implement ways to announce and celebrate the arrival of new businesses (e.g., encourage free newspaper advertising for new businesses in Town, hang promotional banners outside of new businesses, invite representatives of new businesses to Board of Selectmen meetings)
- Develop and implement ways to celebrate the anniversaries of longer-term businesses.
- Publish an inventory of and guide to local businesses.
- Publish hours of operation and encourage businesses to coordinate those hours.
- Encourage businesses to develop promotional strategies to attract new customers.
- Create hooks to attract people to Belmont’s business districts (e.g., the historic walk in Waverley Square).

### **C. Business Tracking (see recommendation #6)**

BEDPG began the development of a comprehensive database of commercial businesses and properties in Belmont. The objective of developing this database is to have the means to be in contact with business and property owners for a variety of purposes, including keeping them informed of changes in relevant policies and procedures and engaging them in the Town's efforts to improve the business climate in Belmont. The data will also be useful in efforts to revitalize various business districts in that it will allow the Town to analyze the status of a business district and develop plans for outreach to underrepresented business segments.

A database of businesses located along the Belmont Street/Trapelo Road Corridor was created as part of the Corridor Study. This list only recently came to the attention of BEDPG members and has not yet been integrated into the list that we developed.

There is no one source of information for a database of commercial businesses and properties. Instead, four potential sources were identified and accessed for this project: the tax assessor's office (commercial property), the light department (commercial accounts), the Town Clerk's office (business certificates), and the Secretary of State's office (corporate database).

The development and maintenance of this database requires ongoing attention to the detail of new listings, closed businesses, and changes. Additional information about the businesses and property owners is needed to increase the value of the database. For example, categorizing the businesses by type and location would allow for targeted appeals.

#### **Recommendations:**

BEDPG recommends that the Business Development Officer, with the support of the Office of Community Development, assume responsibility for the further development and the maintenance of this database and be specifically charged with:

- integrating the two lists (Corridor and BEDPG's townwide database);
- organizing the Town into business districts and areas and cataloguing each business or property accordingly;
- maintaining the integrity of the database by updating and correcting the database on an as needed and regularly scheduled basis; and
- providing other Town departments and committees with access to the database to further their objectives.

## **D. Liquor Licensing (see recommendation #7)**

Business representatives who attended the Vision Implementation Committee's "business friendly" forums were unanimous in their opinion that a full liquor license is necessary to attract a "first class" restaurant to Belmont, that the vast majority of successful dining establishments have full liquor licenses, and that those who don't are the rare exception, not the rule. In addition, during the Town-wide visioning process and in the more recent forums on the business community, residents expressed their preference to be able to dine out in Belmont but their impulse to go elsewhere because they prefer restaurants offering a selection of alcoholic beverages. The potential revenue, employment opportunities, and ancillary benefits (a vibrant business district after 8:00 p.m., for example) leave with them.

The charge to pursue the necessary legal and public hearing process to allow a proposal for full alcohol licensing to be voted on by Town Meeting was given to the Alcoholic Beverage Licensing Committee. While BEDPG was not formally directed to be involved in this effort, we determined that it was appropriate for us to pursue more information as a way of better informing Town Meeting and the public about the merits of introducing full liquor licenses, including assessment of the impact of beer and wine licenses on the town, assessment of the relationship of restaurants with liquor licenses to nearby businesses, and review of the experience other towns have had with the introduction of full liquor licenses.

BEDPG organized around the question of full alcohol licensing for restaurants, gathered data, and made a presentation along with the VIC in support of the measure at Town Meeting in fall 2003 (comments attached). The measure passed and was then placed on the Town ballot on April 5<sup>th</sup>, 2004. In preparation for that vote, BEDPG co-wrote a guest column with the Vision Implementation Committee for the Belmont-Citizen Herald (attached). The vote to approve three full alcohol licenses for restaurants with seating capacity of 130-250 passed by a margin of two-to-one.

During the Town's deliberations on this question, there was some debate about the merits of putting forth a proposal that would limit full alcohol licensing to restaurants with relatively high seating capacity. By definition, this would preclude all existing restaurants. The rationale for this recommendation as provided by the Alcohol Beverage Licensing Committee, which developed the recommendation, was that since the Town's stated intent was to attract new businesses, the new licensing option should be designed expressly to meet that objective; hence, the higher seating capacity.

Others involved in this debate argued that passage of the law with the higher seating capacity penalized existing restaurants who would not have the opportunity to access the licenses in support of the growth of their establishments.

### **Recommendations:**

BEDPG recommends that the Business Development Officer and Office of Community Development take advantage of the availability of full alcohol licensing by encouraging the development of additional restaurant activity in town through the following action steps:

- identify properties in Town that would be suitable locations for restaurants with seating capacity of 130-250;
- facilitate any zoning changes that would be necessary to allow for restaurant development in these locations;
- develop and implement a marketing plan to market these properties to restaurants that meet the criteria identified in the BEDPG survey regarding desirable new businesses.

## **E. Parking (see recommendation #8)**

The lack of a sufficient number of appropriate parking spaces throughout Town was cited as a major problem by business owners who participated in the Vision Committee's "business friendly" forums. Specifically, the Vision Committee recommended that the Board of Selectmen, with the input of the Police Department, "make a commitment to the development of a set of coherent, town-wide on-street parking regulations" and that a committee with diverse representation be established to develop a town-wide parking plan. In addition, the Vision Committee recommended that BEDPG be charged with exploring short- and long-term solutions to the lack of sufficient parking spaces throughout the town, including "conducting an analysis of possible costs and benefits of constructing additional municipal parking, including lots and garages..."

The Board of Selectmen did not approve the recommendations made by the Vision Implementation Committee because they felt that there were enough other groups already looking at the Town's parking challenges. However, BEDPG members proceeded to gather data on parking in the business districts and researched some creative financing options for parking solutions, particularly in Belmont Center.

A separate and comprehensive report, authored by BEDPG member David Johnson and dated November 21, 2004, was compiled as a result of these efforts and is included as an attachment to this report.

### **Recommendations:**

The recommendations included in the aforementioned report are:

- The Town not engage in the parking business.
- A parking structure in Belmont Center be financed and operated privately and tied to the sale of the Belmont Center fire station.
- The Town provide a rent free (or low rent) lease to a private developer for 30 years for the purpose of the parking structure, with provision for continuation.
- Include some provision for free parking (or business subsidized parking) for one month prior to Christmas.
- Provide monthly permits for Town employees, employees of businesses located in the Center, and commuters.
- Explore Monday through Friday public parking in privately owned parking lots (primarily church lots) located near to the Center.

## **F. Permitting (see recommendation #9)**

The lengthy and convoluted permitting process in Belmont was one of the most frequently cited problems raised in the Vision Implementation Committee's "business friendly" forums. As a result of that Committee's recommendation, the Board of Selectmen directed the Office of Community Development to review the permitting processes and procedures as they apply to businesses and to develop recommendations for updating those processes and procedures in a way that would be "timely and fair for the business owners while still keeping reasonable protections and assurance to residents that the town will maintain its 'small town atmosphere.'" In adopting the Vision Committee's recommendation, the Board also charged that this work be done "in consultation with the Business and Economic Development Planning Group."

### Lessons learned/findings/progress

The process of business permitting and licensing is largely procedural/operational in nature, yet it is closely related to and governed by regulatory matters concerning the zoning by-law, including the special permit process and design & site plan review. For the OCD staff responsible for this area of town business, it is a challenge to find the time to attend both to the regulatory matters and the more operational processes and procedures. For this reason, the regulatory matters received the most attention over the past two years

Related changes that were proposed and approved between the time the charge was made to the OCD and the end of 2004 include:

Improvements in OCD/ZBA operating procedures:

- Work meetings to review applications were scheduled to reduce the time it takes to act on petitions.
- OCD revised the procedures for application review and acceptance.
- The Zoning Board of Appeals (ZBA) agreed to use OCD staff to write some decisions in an effort to reduce the time it takes to file decisions.

Zoning By-Law Changes:

- New definitions for various types of restaurants were added to clarify a previously over broad definition that had been interpreted to include bakeries, ice cream shops, candy stores, and catering services. These types of uses do not have the same impact as restaurants and so it makes sense that they be treated differently, which they will now be under this article. In addition, the new definitions will make it easier for applicants to determine where their proposals fit into the zoning by-law.
- New use regulations were created to clearly define where specific types of restaurants are allowed, what types of permits are required, and to address the issue of nonconforming restaurants in the LBIII districts. The changes now allow restaurants of up to 5,000 square feet by-right in LBIII districts. In addition, bakeries, ice cream shops, and candy stores, which are more retail in nature than restaurants, will be allowed by-right in commercial districts LBI, LBII, and LBIII. Restaurants of up to 10,000 square feet are also now allowed by-right in LBI and LBII zoning districts. These new provisions should reduce the need for so many special permits and move some existing restaurants into compliance.
- A provision allowing convenience stores to sell some prepared food items was contradicted by another provision elsewhere in the by-law. This contradictory provision was deleted, thereby clarifying the by-law.

Improvements to the permitting process – through better documentation and coordination of the steps business owners must go through to successfully obtain the necessary permits and licenses – have not yet been completed. In February 2003, directly following the Board’s charge to the OCD, OCD staff documented the existing permitting procedures in order to be able to provide business representatives with more direction than had previously been available. This work was reflected on the Town’s website as well as made available in the OCD and represented a substantial step in the right direction.

In a memo dated February 13, 2004, Planning Coordinator Jeffrey Wheeler reported to the Board of Selectmen on progress made to date on the goal of creating a “more efficient and effective licensing process.” The memo explained that an ad hoc group of employees, representing several different Town departments, all with a role in permitting and licensing of businesses, had been convened. Initial discussions focused on how to make the licensing and permitting processes less difficult and time consuming through better coordination between departments. Specific objectives were developed, as follows:

- Develop one database that accommodates all licensing and permitting information for each business and is accessible by each department.
- Insure that all businesses are properly licensed by developing more effective compliance mechanisms.
- Develop a “one stop shopping process” that includes one packet of information for all licenses, requiring businesses to pay only one fee, conducting all inspections at the same time, and issuing/renewing all licenses at the same time.

In a follow-up conversation with OCD staff in July 2004, however, it was determined that nothing further had been accomplished due to the need to involve information technology staff in the effort to develop a database for more efficient and effective tracking of permits. Because the Town was without a designated IT staff person during this time, the project was on hold.

**Recommendation:**

BEDPG recommends that the staff of the Office of Community Development be reassigned the task of reviewing and upgrading the operational aspects of permitting and licensing for businesses in order to ensure that the relevant practices and procedures are as clear, transparent, and user-friendly as they can be. In order to accomplish this, representative users must be involved in the review process.

## **G. Town Services: Snow Removal (see recommendation #10)**

During Vision Implementation Committee's "business friendly" forums, much frustration was voiced by business people about two important town services – snow and trash removal – which are not provided to them and which have a negative impact on their businesses.

The snow removal issue has two parts: 1) the shoveling of snow from sidewalks, and 2) the removal of snow that piles up along curbs, both from sidewalk shoveling and from street plowing.

### Our charge

BEDPG was charged with reviewing "the town's practices, policies and by-laws on snow removal," determining "how other towns handle this problem," and investigating and identifying "possible solutions, which may include funding and/or personnel options and other alternatives to expedite the removal of the piled snow."

### What we learned

While all streets in Belmont are plowed by the Town, all sidewalks are not. Sidewalk snow plowing and removal by the Town is done on a targeted priority basis, beginning with schools, and followed by school and MBTA bus stops, crosswalks, parking lots, town buildings, funeral homes, and houses of worship.

While property owners are legally required by the Town's by-law (Article 20.11) to remove snow and ice from the sidewalks in front of their buildings within 12 hours, this responsibility is often passed on to their tenants - the business owners -- as part of the rental contract. Compliance with the sidewalk snow removal regulations is spotty. On occasion, when a complaint is logged, the Town will contact a property owner regarding the snow removal requirement and bring that owner into compliance. Although the Town's by-law allows for the Town to respond to a noncompliance situation by removing the snow from the sidewalk in front of the commercial property and passing the costs of doing so onto the noncompliant property owner (Article 20.14), it is not currently Town practice to do this.

The landlords and tenants who do clear their sidewalks typically pile the snow they shovel along the street curbs. This is added to any snow that is left along the curbs from the plowing of the streets, creating a snow removal challenge for the Town. Over the years, the Town's resources for snow removal have been diminished by budget cuts. According to Director of Public Works Peter Castanino, routine snow removal from areas where businesses are located was stopped following the blizzard of '78. Prior to this time, snow removal in business areas was paid for out of emergency, overtime funds. Today, snow removal occurs only during working hours to limit overtime costs; and snow is removed from business areas only after other higher priority areas are addressed. Typically, this means that the only snow plowing and removal that is done from sidewalks in business areas is limited to crosswalks at principal intersections.

Currently, the Town does not have the capacity to consistently remove this piled snow in a timely manner, although they make an effort to do as much as possible. When the snow along our business corridors and in our business districts is not removed, it creates a hazardous situation, is not consumer-friendly, and is unsightly. Because climbing over the piles of snow is a significant deterrent to shoppers, this practice adversely affects the businesses. Business people believe that this situation encourages our residents to go to malls – where plowed parking lots are plentiful.

Although we were charged with investigating the snow removal practices of other towns, this did not happen due to the lack of volunteers willing to take this on.

### Cost data for sidewalk snow removal in business districts

Peter Castanino assessed per storm costs on the assumption that each storm drops six to eight inches of snow. In order to adequately remove snow from sidewalks in business areas, he projects that he would use three crews. During regular business hours, these crews would cost the town \$36,000 per storm; if double shifts were required, the cost would rise to \$54,314 per storm.

### Accomplishments

In the Spring of 2004, BEDPG members met with Peter Castanino of DPW to better understand the Town's snow removal policies and practices. In December of 2004, BEDPG Chair Sara Oaklander met again with Mr. Castanino and recommended that he engage local commercial property and business owners in efforts to adequately address the challenge of snow removal in areas of town where businesses are located. As a result of this discussion, Mr. Castanino drafted a letter to local property and business owners reminding them of their responsibilities with regard to sidewalk snow removal and of the Town's efforts to remove snow from the curbs in a timely manner in the context of severe resource constraints. Although this letter was not sent out until February when snow season was well underway, it represented a good faith effort on the part of DPW to address these challenges.

### **Recommendations:**

Due to the high level of projected costs for the removal of snow from sidewalks in our business areas, BEDPG recognizes that it is not realistic to expect the Town to assume this responsibility. Instead, we recommend that current Town regulations, as stated in our by-laws, be enforced, requiring property owners to shovel the sidewalks in front of their properties. We recommend that the Director of Public Works, in collaboration with the Business Development Officer and Office of Community Development, develop a mechanism for engaging commercial property owners on an ongoing basis in the challenge of timely adequate snow removal from areas where businesses are located. This includes reminding property owners of the relevant regulations and subsequent fines for noncompliance. These reminders should be timely, clear, and put into the context of the Town's efforts to provide safe and accessible access to local businesses during snow season. We also recommend that the regulations be enforced and fines imposed as needed in order to increase compliance.

However, in order for sidewalk shoveling to have the intended benefit in our business areas, property owners need to have someplace to put the snow and the snow already piled curbside needs to be removed. BEDPG recommends that the Town rebuild our capacity to address the challenge of adequate and timely snow removal in areas of town where businesses are located.

## **H. Town Services: Trash Removal (see recommendation #11)**

As mentioned above, during the Vision Implementation Committee's "business friendly" forums, much frustration was voiced by business people about two important town services – snow and trash removal – which are not provided to them and which have a negative impact on their businesses.

### Our Charge

BEDPG charge on trash removal was: "working with the Solid Waste and Recycling Advisory Committee, identify options for removal of trash and recycling from businesses. Determine how other towns handle trash and recycling for businesses and identify and investigate alternative solutions for Belmont."

### What we learned

A relatively low effort trash removal program option for businesses could be developed and operated by the Town or by a private entity, with the Town's full knowledge and cooperation. Such a program, if designed appropriately, would provide local businesses with the opportunity to buy into a group-based trash removal program specifically designed to meet the needs of businesses that would be more affordable than the present methods that individual businesses pursue for lack of any other option. A business trash removal program would be likely to have the added benefit of increasing participation in recycling.

Upon further investigation, BEDPG found that local trash removal companies would be willing to provide trash removal services to local businesses at a group rate. The rate would be dependent upon the number of participating businesses – the more businesses, the more favorable the rate. As a result of this finding, a letter was sent out in January 2005 to approximately 225 storefront businesses to determine their level of interest in such a program. A reply device was provided in the mailing. Unfortunately, only 15 responses were received from business or property owners indicating an interest in receiving more information and, potentially, in participating in the program. This response was not enough to support proceeding with program development.

### **Recommendation:**

We recommend that the Business Development Officer develop and market a group rate trash removal program for businesses at a later date once the Town has established itself as a good working partner of businesses.

## **I. Vision: The Town-Wide Survey (see recommendation #12)**

### The issue

BEDPG was charged with developing recommendations for “attracting desirable new businesses” and for “preserving and enhancing current businesses.” We recognized that we needed more information from the community to guide and inform our work. We needed to find out from residents about their vision for Belmont’s business community – both in terms of the kinds of new businesses that would be considered “desirable” and the changes that could be made to our business centers to encourage them to take more of their business to those areas. For these reasons, we developed a survey for distribution to Belmont residents.

### What we did and what we learned

During the fall of 2003, BEDPG conducted a survey of Town residents with the following objectives:

- identify types of changes residents believe would improve Belmont’s business districts;
- define “desirable” new businesses; and
- gauge residents’ views on restaurants, parking and traffic, and other hot button issues.

A survey questionnaire was designed by BEDPG members and circulated to Town residents in a variety of ways. The result was that we received 525 completed surveys that could be included in our tally of responses and from which we could glean additional comments regarding the topics addressed in the survey.

The full final report of this project is attached.

Although not representative of the Town demographic profile, the respondents to the survey nonetheless expressed some compelling views, encouraging us to draw some conclusions about the opinions of Belmont residents with regard to our business districts. Specifically, survey respondents:

- prefer a greater variety of businesses with fewer banks, pizza places and beauty salons.
- favor the retail/restaurant mix of other towns.
- want more food! In particular, they want more fresh and prepared food options and more places to go out to eat.
- will tolerate moderate increases in traffic and parking hassles if that's what it takes to revitalize our business districts.
- agree that Belmont will benefit in a variety of ways if improvements are made to our business districts.
- would go to Belmont’s business districts more often if sidewalk/street conditions were improved (trash, snow, pavement conditions, curbs, space, crosswalks).

Many other important issues and concerns were highlighted by the many and varied responses received. The results of the survey combined with the comments that residents took the time to include could provide a compelling roadmap for Town officials and property owners and developers who are interested in and committed to the enhancement of Belmont’s business districts

### **Recommendation:**

BEDPG recommends that the results of this survey be used to inform the efforts of the Business Development Officer and the Business Development Committee to work collaboratively with property owners to attract desirable new businesses.

## **J. The Waverley Square Fire Station (see recommendation #13)**

The idea for helping to define the re-use of the Waverley Square Fire Station arose in BEDPG during discussions of “distressed” buildings and the likely benefits that would be derived if the Town could engage in proactive planning to address the disposition of those buildings. The Waverley Square Fire Station was thought to present a unique opportunity because it belonged to the Town, rather than to a private property owner. BEDPG believed that because of its prominent location, the Fire Station might serve as the catalyst for the revitalization of Waverley Square.

\$50,000 in funding to complete an inclusive planning process was sought and received from the Ready Resource Fund, a grant program administered by the state’s Department of Housing and Community Development. The Board of Selectmen appointed the The Waverley Square Fire Station Re-Use Steering Committee in January 2004 and charged it with seeking a consensus surrounding a re-use alternative that would allow for the prompt disposition and development of the Fire Station property in order to accelerate the flow of tax revenue from the property. Through this consensus building, the Steering Committee hoped to avoid a protracted public debate over what development alternative would be appropriate. Such a debate would delay the sale of the property as well as the flow of community benefits from the development once the sale occurred. The belief was that the kind of discord, debate and delay that has typically occurred over significant development proposals could be short-circuited through a facilitated planning process that would occur before the Town disposed of the Fire Station and during the time the Town could, as owner of the property, exercise control over the property’s future.

Extensive public input was combined with relevant technical data collection and analysis to build a compelling case for what an appropriate re-use of the Fire Station might be. The Committee’s final recommendation was that the Fire Station be developed as a condominium complex. Further details of the planning process and outcome can be found in the Final Report and Recommendations of the Waverley Square Fire Station Re-Use Steering Committee, dated July 2004.

### **Recommendation:**

BEDPG recommends full implementation of the recommendations of the Waverley Square Fire Station Re-Use Committee.