

**A Report to the Belmont Board of Selectmen:**

**Improving Reciprocal Communication between the  
Town of Belmont and Its Residents**

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**Belmont Public Information and Communications Planning Group**

**John Bowe  
James Fitzgerald  
Lesley Hausmann  
Myron Kassaraba**

**Timothy McCarthy  
Meg O'Brien, Convener  
John Verrilli**

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## Executive Summary

The Belmont Public Information and Communications Planning Group (PIC) has researched reciprocal communication between the Town of Belmont and its residents. The group recommends that the Town carry out the following projects:

- Continue to provide communication through multiple channels: phone, paper, Belmont web site, e-mail, and cable access.
- Improve phone service levels and carefully gather requirements for selection of a new phone system
- Continue to improve and invest in the Belmont web site
- Encourage and enhance the use of public-access cable television

The group's findings and recommendations are described in greater detail in this report.

## Introduction

In November 2002, the Belmont Selectmen requested that the Vision21 Implementation Committee constitute a planning group to focus on communications between the Town and its residents. There was widespread recognition that the Town had made great strides in improving the level of communications in the last several years. However, it was acknowledged that improvements could be made, as residents remained unclear about how to obtain needed information and how to provide input to Town departments and committees.

In February 2003, the Public Information and Communication Planning Group (PIC) met to begin its work, guided by elements of the Working Vision for Belmont adopted by Town Meeting on April 23, 2001.

“Town government responds to the concerns of the residents.”

“(We will) foster and maintain an open and inclusive decision-making process.”

“We will promote the involvement of all residents in the life of our community, support citizen involvement in our town affairs, and rely on an effective, representative local government.”

## Goals

Based on these statements, the Selectmen gave the following mandate the Public Information and Communications Planning Group:

“The mandate for the Public Information and Communications Planning Group will be to develop new, and improve existing, methods of reciprocal information sharing and communication between the public (residents and business owners) and town government. All communication vehicles should be explored, including but not limited to public meetings, print (newspaper and mailings) and cable television, but special attention should be paid to the rapidly expanding possibilities of the Internet.”

The word **develop** was changed to **recommend** at our initial meeting with the Selectmen on June 23<sup>rd</sup>.

## Composition of Planning Group

Because we have representation from the following groups responsible for developing communication initiatives, we have knowledge of the activities of major town committees and town departments. The Planning group and their affiliations are:

Vision21 Implementation Committee	Meg O'Brien
School Committee	John Bowe
Cable Access Committee	John Verrilli
Belmont Municipal Light Dept.	Tim McCarthy
Information Technology Advisory Committee	Myron Kassaraba
Library Trustees	Tom Faulkner
Citizen at Large	Jim Fitzgerald
Citizen at Large	Lesley Hausmann

## Work to Date

The PIC began its work in February 2003. It has gathered and analyzed information about current communication vehicles/channels within the Town (Appendices A and B). It has received briefings from the members' Town committees. It has conducted a Communication Forum for Belmont residents (Appendix C) to talk about communication issues and suggestions. The PIC then obtained feedback on these preliminary findings from Town Department Heads (Appendix D). It also benchmarked Belmont's web site against those of comparable towns (Appendix E). Lastly, the PIC has created this report and presentation to the Board of Selectmen.

## Findings

The following findings are a summary of information gathered from the sources listed in the previous section.

### Channels

- Constituents use a variety of channels to obtain and provide information. Channels include phone, town web site, face-to-face, newspapers, mail, other town entities (i.e., schools, library, League of Women Voters).
- The primary channels used are telephone and Belmont town Web Site (BTWS).
- Certain channels are currently under-utilized, particularly mail and the cable public access channel.

### Residents

- Some inquirers have difficulty obtaining information by telephone because
  - They do not know the correct source for the information they seek
  - Employees may not proactively volunteer information.
- Residents must take the initiative to obtain most of the information they seek about the town, rather than having it “pushed” out to them by the town.
- In general, residents encounter significantly fewer difficulties when providing information to the town as opposed to seeking it.
- There is an “information gap” that seems to occur when residents do not have children in the school system.

### Belmont Town Web Site

- The Belmont Town Web Site (BTWS) gets a lot of traffic and it has increased rapidly in 2003 (see attached traffic analysis, Appendix B).
- The content and organization of the BTWS is improving, though some users can't easily find the information they seek or they question its timeliness.
- For those with Internet access, the BTWS is often the first place to look for information (approximately 70 percent of households have access).
- With Comcast now offering high-speed Internet access, we anticipate more residents to have always-on broadband connections.

- Belmont Town Departments are realizing the benefits of increased access.
  - Ability to offer 24 x 7 service
  - Fewer complaints
  - Compliments on timely, clear, accurate information
- When the BTWS is benchmarked against other communities, it is in the middle of the pack (see Appendix E).
- Every community is actively investing time and effort (some more than others) in web resources for their residents.

## Recommendations

- Continue to provide communication through many channels: phone, paper, BTWS, e-mail, cable access.
- Improve phone service levels and provide input for selection of new phone system.
  - Create a department contact list or Town Directory, for annual distribution to households and businesses on paper and for posting on the BTWS as a downloadable document.
  - Consider customer service training for employees and define standards for answering phones
  - Determine customer communications requirements as input for the selection of a new phone system.
- Continue to improve and invest in the BTWS.
  - Create easier navigation.
  - Organize site by functions, questions, as well as by departments.
  - Provide a page of FAQ's that provide shortcuts to appropriate pages.
  - Improve access to on-line forms.
  - Develop a system for updating information, including providing a "date last changed."
    - Enhance automatic information delivery via email to interested residents.
    - Expand use of e-mail lists
  - Provide ability for residents to manage their subscriptions to e-mail lists.
- Plan for increasing investment in the BTWS.

- Both new technology and training will be required in the future to support on-line transactions, a more extensive and searchable document repository, better site search and navigation, e-mail tracking, etc.
  - Actively track usage metrics to determine investment needs.
    - Look for overall trends and identify most frequently used features.
    - Conduct periodic online surveys or polls as well as proactively encourage site feedback to get a clear picture of what users think about the site.
    - Use these metrics and feedback to help determine investment needs.
  - Ensure that all Town Departments and employees are properly engaged in providing and maintaining BTWS.
- Educate residents about how to find and provide information on the BTWS.
    - Place “Welcome - An Information Guide to Belmont” on web site.
    - Consider use of volunteers to provide training to help residents use the town web site.
    - Produce and promote a program on TV8 highlighting the BTWS and providing tips and instructions on how to use the web site.
- Encourage and enhance the use of public-access cable television.
    - Increase cable coverage of public meetings and forums, to the extent possible, given the current resources at BCTV-8. Town employees can attend studio workshops to become certified producers.
    - Use cable presentations to educate residents about large, long-term issues (such as the Trapelo Road Corridor Study).
    - Support the work of the Media Center Task Force in preparations for upcoming cable license negotiations and possible creation of an independently run public-access channel.
    - Plan for web streaming of video and video-on-demand.

## Next Steps

- PIC receives input from the Board of Selectmen and revises this report as necessary.
- BOS prioritizes potential projects based on ease of implementation, impact, and cost.
- BOS determines which parts of Town government should implement these recommendations.

- Town implements projects. Include coordination of efforts with other committees where relevant, especially Vision21, ITAC, Media Center Task Force, Cable Access Committee, and the Belmont Cable Advisory Committee.
- PIC evaluates implementation in late 2004.

## **Appendix A: Current Means of Communication Within the Town**

The following charts describe the current vehicles or channels of communication used in Belmont from two points of view:

- How the Town government communicates to its residents
- How a resident communicates to the Town government

For each means of communication, the charts present the following information:

- Cost: low, medium, or high expense
- Immediacy: how quickly the information can be communicated
- Saturation: how many residents receive the information
- Information type: whether the information is sent by the town (pushed) or requested by the resident (pulled)
- Ease: How easy it is to use the means of communication

From The Town's Viewpoint		The Means of Communication By Which The Town Communicates To The Residents														
		Local Cable Access Channel		Internet							Town Bills					
		Bulletin	Broadcast	Web Site Access	email	Telephone	Mailings	Newspaper	Newsletter	Public Meeting	Light Bills	Water Bills	Tax Bills	Welcome Book	Sandwich Board	Telephone Book
Cost	L	L	L	L	L	H	L	H	M	L-M	L-M	L-M	H	L	L	
Immediacy	H	H	H	H	H	M	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	L	
Saturation	M	M	S	S	A	A	S	A	F	A	A	A	S		A	
Information Type	Push	Push	Push	Both	Both	Push	Push	Push	I	Push	Push	Push	Push	Push	Push	
Ease	E	M	M	E	D	D	E	D	M	M	M	M	D	E	E	

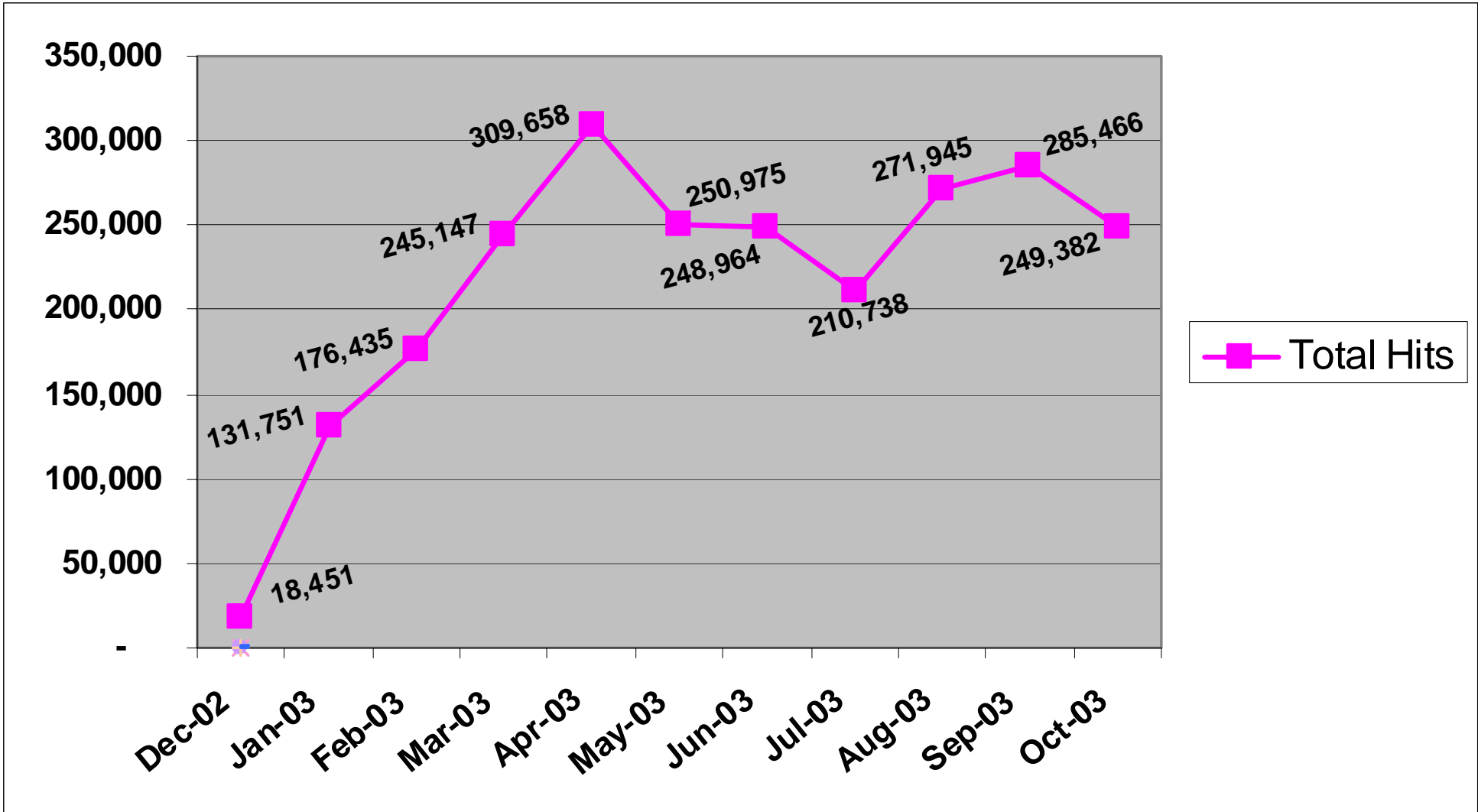
<b>Cost</b>	H=high, M=medium, L=low
<b>Immediacy</b>	H=high, M=medium, L=low
<b>Saturation</b>	A=all, M=most, S=some, F=few
<b>Information Type</b>	Push, Pull, Both, Interactive
<b>Ease</b>	D=difficult, M=medium, E=easy

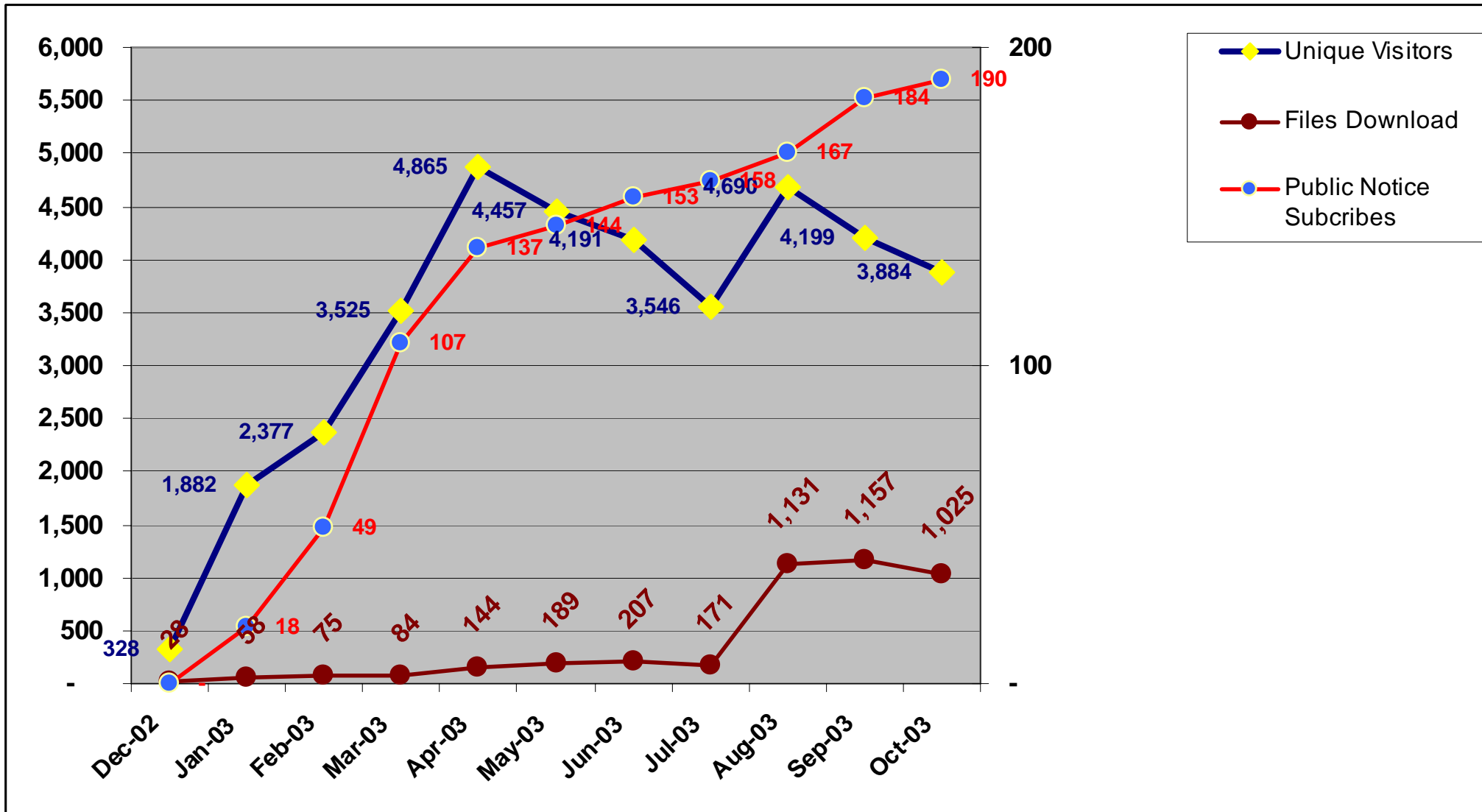
From a Resident's Viewpoint		The Means of Communication By Which a Resident Communicates To The Town Government														
		Local Cable Access Channel		Internet							Town Bills					
		Bulletin	Broadcast	Web Site Access	email	Telephone	Mailings	Newspaper	Newsletter	Public Meeting	Light Bills	Water Bills	Tax Bills	Welcome Book	Sandwich Board	Telephone Book
Cost	L	L	NA	L	L	L	L	NA	L	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	L	NA
Immediacy	M	M	NA	H	H	M	L	NA	L	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	L	NA
Saturation	M	M	NA	S	A	A	S	NA	F	NA	NA	NA	NA			NA
Information Type	Push	Push	NA	Both	Both	Push	Push	NA	I	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	Push	NA
Ease	E	H	NA	E	E	E	E	NA	M	NA	NA	NA	NA	NA	E	NA

<b>Cost</b>	H=high, M=medium, L=low
<b>Immediacy</b>	H=high, M=medium, L=low
<b>Saturation</b>	A=all, M=most, S=some, F=few
<b>Information Type</b>	Push, Pull, Both, Interactive
<b>Ease</b>	D=difficult, M=medium, E=easy

## **Appendix B: Belmont Web Site Statistics**

The following charts show the increase in traffic on the Belmont Town Web Site (BTWS). The rapid increase in early 2003 resulted from the implementation of Virtual Town Hall and the availability of documents in electronic form.





## Appendix C: Recommendations from Communications Forum, October 16, 2003

The following issues and recommendations reflect major themes expressed by Belmont residents at the Public Information and Communications (PIC) Planning Group Forum.

**Issue:** The Town web site is poorly maintained, lacks an indication of how recently specific pages were updated and, therefore, sometimes provides out-of-date or wrong information.

**Recommendations:** Belmont needs to provide for enhanced web site use and maintenance.

- Organize the web site by function or questions in addition to departments.
- Develop a page of FAQs that include topics and shortcuts to the page on that topic.
- Focus on those areas that receive a lot of “hits”, like Recreation and Highway Dept.
- Develop a system for updating calendars and schedules.
- Create support group of web savvy people to maintain the web site and train others.
- Create user groups of web and software package savvy people to share learnings regularly.
- Take advantage of training opportunities, especially virtual user groups, to get people up to speed quicker.

**Issue:** The web site is difficult to navigate leaving users stranded without links or a way out.

**Recommendations:** The Town web site needs a better navigation system and a better “search” capability.

- Build additional links among existing web site pages.
- Investigate new software that enables better navigation and search systems.
- Make it easier to access forms.

**Issue:** Phone access to Town Departments needs improvement.

**Recommendations:** Improve phone service levels even before the new phone system is decided upon and installed.

- Create a list of **contacts in** departments, with phone numbers and a brief description of department responsibilities. Distribute paper lists to residents using the electric bill, the newsletter, etc. annually. Post this list on web site too.
- Create and enforce a telephone response policy to set standards and expectations.
- Use these service standards as part of the phone system purchase decision.

- Consider customer service training.

**Issue:** Town should proactively “push out” information

**Recommendation:** Regular communication from the Town government is important to informing residents and maintaining confidence in the functioning of Town government.

- Continue the Town newsletters.
- Expand use of e-mailing lists to subscribers.
- Utilize web site, public forums and Channel 8 to educate public about long-term issues such as the Trapelo Road Corridor Study.

## Appendix D: Input from Town Department Heads

Town Department Heads offered the following observations in a meeting with PIC representatives on November 13, 2003 about the recommendations from the Communications Forum.

- Residents, especially older and disabled residents, need communication by paper, telephone, and in-person as well as through the Internet.
- Given scarce town resources, it's hard for employees to find the time to create quarterly newsletter to townspeople.
- Town wants to make its web site more accessible and easier to use but it's difficult for personnel to find time to do this.

Town Department Heads mentioned some benefits of the BTWS following the meeting:

- People are a lot more likely to know what they want when they call into our department.
- Most people work at the same time our office is open so it is inconvenient for them to come by, find a parking space and get the answers they want. By offering information, forms or email capabilities via the web we offer many people 7 x 24 service.
- We are reaching more people than we ever have before.
- The number of complaints has dropped.
- Citizens, vendors and contractors are acknowledging an atmosphere of improved customer service i.e. timeliness of information, accuracy of information, clarity of information.
- The number of telephone calls we would normally receive has dropped.
- I don't have to spend so much time at the copying machine.
- By not having to spend as much time on tedious activities we can focus on more challenging and important activities.

## **Appendix E: Belmont Town Web Site Benchmarking**

The following table compares Belmont's web sites with those of nearby communities.

<b>Function</b>	<b>Belmont</b>	<b>Arlington</b>	<b>Concord</b>	<b>Lexington</b>	<b>Newton</b>	<b>Reading</b>	<b>Waltham</b>	<b>Watertown</b>
<b>Assessor's Office (inc. assessment database)</b>	Yes, searchable database	Yes, searchable database	Yes, but hard to navigate	No	Yes, searchable database	Yes, searchable Ziplink	Yes, searchable Patriot Properties	Yes, ext. link to searchable Patriot Properties ("Back" button doesn't work once offsite)
<b>Development / Zoning</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes			Yes, minimal content
<b>Libraries</b>	Yes, separate web site	Yes, separate web site	Yes	Yes, separate web site	Yes, different navigation from main site	Yes, separate web site	Yes	Yes, separate web site
<b>Public Safety - FD, PD</b>	Yes, PD has separate web site	Yes, FD has separate web site	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes, PD has separate web site	Yes, PD has separate web site	Yes, PD has separate web site
<b>Recreation Department</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes, minimal content
<b>Senior Services</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes, separate web site	Yes	Yes	Yes, minimal content
<b>Selectpersons / Town Meeting</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes, but Town mtg info is a dead link	Yes	Board of Aldermen	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Town Clerk</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes
<b>Utilities - Water and Power, Highway, Trash / Recycling</b>	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes, Light Dpt. Own site	Yes	Yes
<b>Business Rules and Regulations</b>	Zoning By-Laws; Permits / Procedures for Opening a New Business		Not obvious	Zoning By-Laws; Development Regulations	City Ordinances			Zoning Ordinance
<b>URL</b>	<a href="http://www.town.belmont.ma.us">http://www.town.belmont.ma.us</a>	<a href="http://www.town.arlington.ma.us">http://www.town.arlington.ma.us</a>	<a href="http://www.concordnet.org">http://www.concordnet.org</a>	<a href="http://ci.lexington.ma.us">http://ci.lexington.ma.us</a>	<a href="http://www.ci.newton.ma.us">http://www.ci.newton.ma.us</a>	<a href="http://www.ci.reading.ma.us">http://www.ci.reading.ma.us</a>	<a href="http://www.city.waltham.ma.us">http://www.city.waltham.ma.us</a>	<a href="http://www.ci.watertown.ma.us">http://www.ci.watertown.ma.us</a>
<b>Ease of locating web site using Google (1 difficult to 5 easy scale)</b>	4	5	4	4	4	4	4	2

<b>Function</b>	<b>Belmont</b>	<b>Arlington</b>	<b>Concord</b>	<b>Lexington</b>	<b>Newton</b>	<b>Reading</b>	<b>Waltham</b>	<b>Watertown</b>
<b>Ease of using the web site, generally (1 difficult to 5 easy scale)</b>	3.5; generally common navigation, but somewhat inconsistent	3; lots of information, very confusing navigation, multiple sites	2; no common navigation; seems to be collection of sites tied together	3; inconsistent navigation	4; simple pulldown menu-based navigation, but inconsistent navigation elsewhere; main Public Works link dead	3.5; very simple site, no depth	4; nice design, no depth in site	4.5; very elegant, well designed site, a pleasure to use, but minimal content
<b>Email list subscriptions</b>	Yes	None found	None found	None found	None found	None found	None found	Yes, but no lists to subscribe to
<b>Transaction capability</b>	Link for electronically billing various accounts	Yes, online reg. and pmt. for Rec dept. activities; online viewing of property tax, water, excise, parking tickets	None found	None found	None found; online payment survey on Treasury Dept page	None found	Yes, pay parking tickets	None found
<b>Calendar</b>	Yes, but Council on Aging calendar empty (is it used?)	Yes	Not really	Yes, but School Committee Meeting schedule is dead link	Yes	Not really	Not working	Yes
<b>Email inbound to Town functions</b>	to 22 Depts, plus Selectmen	to 12+ Depts, plus Selectmen	Generally no (including no email to Selectmen)	to 16 Depts; to Selectmen as a group	to 27 Depts; no obvious overall Dept directory; "Contact Us" pops up useful Customer_Service email addr	Yes, lists of addresses	No	No
<b>Forms downloads</b>	Yes, but not found under "Forms and Documents" on home page	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Yes	Not really	Yes, extensive document center, very well organized

<b>Function</b>	<b>Belmont</b>	<b>Arlington</b>	<b>Concord</b>	<b>Lexington</b>	<b>Newton</b>	<b>Reading</b>	<b>Waltham</b>	<b>Watertown</b>
<b>Mapping information</b>	Voter precinct map, zoning map	Yes, quite extensive	Not obvious	Not obvious	Street map, precinct map, zoning map, school dist. map, public trans. map, historic maps	MapQuest		MapQuest
<b>Census information</b>	No	Not obvious	Not obvious	High-level info	Separate page with lots of demographic links			
<b>Misc. notes</b>	Uses Virtual Town Hall (VTH)	Uses some VTH capabilities, lookup taxes & water bills	Have Town org charts but w/o names filled in	Uses some VTH capabilities	Some links take you to PDFs when you don't expect it; this is annoying			town employee phone directory search; overall site content less than most others
<b>Vendor</b>	VTH	VTH & indy						CivicPlus