Report of the Belmont Center Parking Study Committee

There are three parts to this report.

The first section of the report describes in general terms the Committee's recommendations for balancing the diverse interests of Belmont Center stakeholders. This is the Committee's ranking of priorities and is intended to serve as a broad, policy-level guide to future action.

The second section of the report describes specific recommendations for increasing parking in the Center in the next one to two years. These recommendations fall into two categories: structural and regulatory. The structural recommendations in the low to moderate cost range ($292-386K) are as follows:

- Reconfiguring the Claflin St. municipal lot to create 43 new spaces for $200-250K.
- Create 12 new spaces east of the Electric Light building between Concord Ave and the MBTA tracks for $40-60K.
- Consider an additional 20 spaces further to the east of the Electric Light site for another $40-60K.
- Conduct a parking analysis to evaluate impact of these measures at a cost of $12-16K.

The regulatory recommendations could provide substantial increases in parking availability, but the impact of these changes needs to be tested and modified over the next several years.

The third section presents an analysis of the long term parking situation in Belmont Center and discusses the pros and cons of constructing a cost-intensive parking structure on the site of the Claflin Street parking lot. Two plans are presented that differ in scale and cost between $1.4 and 2.7M.

I. Priorities

The Belmont Center Parking Study Committee, after reviewing previous studies of Belmont Center parking and soliciting input from business owners, area residents, Town committees and Town officials, is in agreement on the following priorities:

- *Customer parking is the top priority.* In order to maintain the vitality of the Belmont Center commercial district it is essential to insure adequate customer parking close to the Leonard Street businesses. To remain competitive with similar nearby shopping districts both short and medium-term parking should be provided to customers of Belmont Center businesses.

- *Employee parking is the second priority.* In order for Belmont businesses and town government to attract and retain employees adequate parking spaces are necessary. While all reasonable measures should be taken to encourage commuting by bus, train, bicycle or foot, the fact is that most Belmont Center employees commute by car and will continue to do so. In general, parking for employees should be further from the Leonard Street businesses than customer parking.

- *Commuter parking in Belmont Center is a lower priority than customer and employee parking.* Given the existing burden of customer and employee parking, commuter parking in Belmont Center should be discouraged. Instead, commuters can be offered free parking on non-residential streets at some distance from the Center.

- *Pedestrian safety and the appearance of Belmont Center should be improved.* The streetscape and pedestrian walkways of the Center should be upgraded to improve safety and appearance and encourage additional pedestrian use. These changes will result in loss of a few parking spots, but the trade-off is well worth making.

The Committee also recommends that planning for future changes to Belmont Center parking supply should take into consideration temporal changes in parking demand. This important variable has two aspects. First, there are major increases in parking demand during the fall holiday season; that is when the parking shortage becomes severe. Ideally parking regulations can be designed to increase available parking for shoppers during these periods. Second, ongoing and planned construction and redevelopment projects in Belmont Center will affect parking supply and demand over the next five years or longer. Specifically, the ongoing renovation of the Town Hall Complex, the construction of a new fire substation on part of the Alexander Avenue lot, the possible sale of the present fire station for commercial development will all reduce parking supply, increase parking demand, or both. The Town should make every effort to minimize the loss of spaces associated with each of these projects. In particular, the design of the fire substation should take into account the importance of parking proximate to the Alexander Avenue businesses. The impending changes in Belmont Center may require substantial measures to increase parking supply, but the scale, character and timing of each of these projects, and their consequent impact on parking demand, is difficult to project. Therefore parking demand should be systematically monitored by the town as these projects move forward in the next five years to better inform future decision making about Belmont Center parking.

II. Low-cost recommendations to increase parking in Belmont Center.

Two sets of recommendations are described below: structural changes and regulatory measures. The structural changes entail creation of new parking. The regulations are mostly intended to shift long-term parking away from the Leonard Street businesses, and provide flexibility to change the rules during the fall holiday season. (Currently, long-term parkers consume 70% of spaces in the Claflin St. lot.)

The main intent of these recommendations is to create new long-term employee parking at modest cost, to improve the streetscape of the center in order to encourage Belmont residents to walk rather than drive, and to encourage shoppers to linger and explore many Belmont Center businesses. The Committee believes that it should be possible for the town to implement these recommendations over the next two years, increasing the Belmont Center parking supply by approximately 65 spaces.

1 Structural changes

1.1 Redesign the Claflin Street municipal parking lot and add spaces to the parking lot behind Filene's to create approximately 43 new spaces. The redesign would include replacing 10 existing parallel spaces on the east side of Claflin Street (between the two entrances to the municipal lot) with 22 perpendicular spaces that would extend into the municipal lot (a net gain of 12 spaces). Additional reconfiguration of the lot would provide an additional 16 spaces. On the west side of Claflin Street, an additional 15 parking spaces will be created by replacing the 8 existing parallel spaces between the entrance and exit to the private lot behind Filene's with 23 perpendicular spaces, resulting in a total of 43 additional spaces. The current layout and the new design proposed here are illustrated in **Appendix A**. Together, the cost of these changes to the Claflin Street parking area is estimated at $200-250K.

1.2 Create approximately 12 new parking spaces on the east side of the Electric Light Building, between Concord Avenue and the MBTA tracks. These spaces should be well concealed by landscaping. Access would be from the existing drive north of the Electric Light Building on Concord Avenue. Parking in these spaces would be limited to full time town employees holding permits. The schematic of this site is illustrated in **Appendix B**. The estimated cost of this project is $40-$60K.

1.3 Explore creation of approximately 20 new parking spaces along the north side of the railroad bed between the stone bridge and the pedestrian tunnel. These spaces would also be accessed from behind the Electric Light building, and would be limited to full time town employees holding permits. The surrounding area, especially the hill sloping down to Concord Avenue, should be landscaped to minimize the visual impact of the new parking lot. This project is estimated to cost an additional $40-$60K.

1.4 Reconstruct Leonard St. with widened sidewalks, road neck-downs, improved landscaping including trees, new lighting and additional sidewalk furniture. These measures should improve safety and encourage pedestrian traffic, but will decrease the parking supply by 8-10 spaces. Detailed plans for such improvements have been proposed by the Traffic Advisory Committee, and are estimated to cost $750K.

1.5 Investigate whether parking can be expanded along the north side of the MBTA tracks west of the Municipal Light/Police Station. Developing this area is complicated by the presence of electrical equipment behind the Electric Light building.

2 Regulatory changes

2.1 Maintain the start time for long term parking in the Claflin Street Lot at 9:30 a.m. in order to limit all day commuter parking. Only permit holders may park before 9:30 a.m.

2.2 Limit all day permit parking in the Claflin Street Lot between Thanksgiving and New Year's Day to increase customer parking. This measure will reduce the number of employees (town or business) able to park in the Claflin lot during peak shopping season. There would be no all day parking for non-permit holders during this period. As an initial test of this approach, the number of permits could be reduced to 35 during the peak shopping season.

2.3 Maintain parking on Leonard Street at one hour, with four to six new 15-minute parking spots in front of high turnover businesses on both sides of Leonard Street (two to three new 15 minute spaces on each side of the street). Change existing one hour parking on Claflin Street to two hours to make it consistent with the first row of free spaces in the Claflin Street lot.

2.4 Allow all day parking on both sides of Royal Road in front of the Lions Club, and along the north side of the War Memorial triangle. This will create approximately 10 new spaces.

2.5 Town employees with parking permits should be allowed to park in the Town Hall lot, or on Royal Road only. Replace signs on the north side of Royal Road to indicate that permit parking is allowed for Town employees. Town employees should not be parking on Moore Street, Pleasant Street, or in the Claflin Street lot; this will free up spaces for commercial use.

2.6 Encourage Belmont Center employees (or their employers) who do not want to pay $40/month for Claflin lot permits to park at more distant locations such as the north side of Concord Avenue (east of Cottage St.) next to the High School playing fields. Parking is currently unrestricted at this underutilized location.

2.7 Install new signs to effectively describe parking regulations where necessary. Encourage the police to monitor and enforce the new regulations. The committee endorses the pending increase of parking violation fines to $15.

2.8 Explore leasing satellite parking (e.g., All Saints Church, First Church of Belmont, St. Joseph's RCC) during the months of November and December.

The recommended structural changes could increase parking by 65-67 spaces. The regulatory measures will further increase in parking supply, and they will afford the Town greater flexibility to increase the number of parking spots available to shoppers in the Center during periods of peak demand.

Finally, the Town should monitor the impact of the above changes on the demand for parking in Belmont Center with an additional parking utilization study to be conducted after the measures outlined above have been completed. Since parking demand appears to vary in a seasonal manner, the committee recommends that four, two-day studies analyzing demand be conducted at various times over a 12-month period. The cost of each study is estimated at $3-4K, for a total cost of $12-16K.

III. Long-term parking solutions.

After most or all short-term, lower-cost steps outlined above are implemented and evaluated, the committee recommends that the Town consider a parking structure on Claflin Street should those measures prove inadequate. The analysis of parking demand will dictate whether such a structure is necessary, and would help determine its size. Provided there is sufficient need for further increases in supply, the Committee recommends that the Town consider one of the following long-term, higher cost solutions:

Option 1 A proposed parking facility on the Claflin Street site would be a two-story structure with a parking level at grade and a single, elevated level. The projected facility could accommodate approximately 196 cars, an increase of 56 cars over the existing lot. It would be constructed from pre-cast cement, and the facility would be attractively landscaped. The estimated cost of the structure would be $1.4-$1.6 million. The higher range cost would include brick veneer and metal architectural details. The costs noted here are rough estimates based on a smaller version of the structure described in option 2 below. Out of the total 196 spaces in the proposed facility, 124 would be within the structure, 60 at grade within the structure, 64 on an elevated deck within the structure, and the remaining 72 spaces would be at grade outside the structure.

Option 2 A proposed parking garage on the Claflin Street site would be a larger version of the structure described in Option 1. The projected facility could accommodate approximately 240 cars, an increase of 100 cars over the existing lot. The structure would be constructed from pre-cast cement, and the surrounding area would be attractively landscaped. An illustration and schematic of such a structure is shown in **Appendix C**. The estimated cost of the structure would be $2.4-$2.7 million. The higher range cost would include brick veneer and metal architectural details. Out of the total 240 spaces in the proposed facility, 207 would be within the structure, 99 at grade within the structure, 108 on an elevated deck within the structure, and the remaining 33 spaces would be at grade outside the structure.

Finance: Financing for such a proposed parking structure could include a number of options. Because the Town is able to borrow at lower long-term rates than private investors, the lowest cost financing option could be the Town or a public/private partnership financing such a proposed parking facility. Choosing the lowest cost financing option could provide lower parking fees and reduce the revenue requirement.

The Committee recommends that the Town consult with a municipal finance specialist to confirm income and expenses and to help lower financing costs of the proposed parking facility. Such a consultant could explore the range of financing options available to the Town. Options to lower financing costs could include using a longer amortization period or minimizing short term costs through short term bonds. There may also be state or federal programs that could lower financing costs. By minimizing financing costs, the Town could lower fees in the parking facility or make the facility more profitable.

Revenue: Revenue requirements to pay for Option 2, as an example of the annual cost of a parking garage, is outlined in **Appendix D**. During the initial 20-year financing period, in order to break even, we estimate that the parking facility would need to generate $347,000 per year to cover principle ($138,000 per year), interest ($80,000 per year assuming a rate of 5%), and operational costs ($129,000). Using 300 days of operation per year, this amounts to $1150 per day. After the initial 20-year financing period, the break-even point should be reduced by the amount of annual debt service that would be retired. The parking facility would need to generate enough income only to cover operational costs, and the amount necessary to break even would drop to $129,000 per year, or $430 per day of operation (in current dollars; i.e., not adjusted for inflation). From year 21 thereon, the parking facility could produce increased profits or reduced parking rates.

Potential Benefits: A new parking structure could reduce the periodic parking supply shortage in Belmont Center. The smaller structure would add 46-56 spaces, reducing the estimated parking deficit in the Leonard Street shopping area by 32-39% percent of the estimated 145 spaces (according the BSC Group study). The larger structure, by providing an additional 100 spaces, could reduce the estimated parking deficit by 69%. The larger structure may be more efficient and economically feasible to build compared to the smaller structure (Option 1). Either structure could provide additional parking in a prime location, close to stores. By providing for current and future demand, this parking structure could help make Belmont Center more competitive, and economically viable. Such a parking structure could help the Center attract and retain a wider range of quality tenants and make the Center a better, more convenient place to shop. Shoppers could spend more time shopping and less time looking for parking spaces, helping reduce traffic in and around the center particularly during peak demand periods. New landscaping around a proposed parking facility could reduce the visual impact of the structure and could improve the surrounding area.

Potential Drawbacks: There are five major concerns regarding a new parking garage in Belmont Center at the Claflin Street site. First, either of the proposed garages could have a major impact on abutters, both in terms of aesthetics and quality of living. Second, according to the parking supply study conducted for the Town by BSC Group, a net increase of 46-56 spaces (Option 1) or 108 spaces (Option 2) amounts to a modest 7% or 12% increase, respectively, in the total parking supply. Third, the cost of $24,000-$27,000 per new space is quite large considering the relatively small change in the overall supply. Fourth, the revenue necessary to pay for the costs of building and operating a new garage may be difficult to achieve. According to the available models, the break-even point of the larger garage would be $1150 per day of operation; compare that with the current revenue at the Claflin Street lot of $109 per day. Thus, a large infusion of money, either from parking fees or by municipal support, would be required to make the garage viable. Finally, increasing the parking supply by this modest amount could increase traffic on streets in Belmont Center and the surrounding neighborhood, particularly during periods of peak demand.

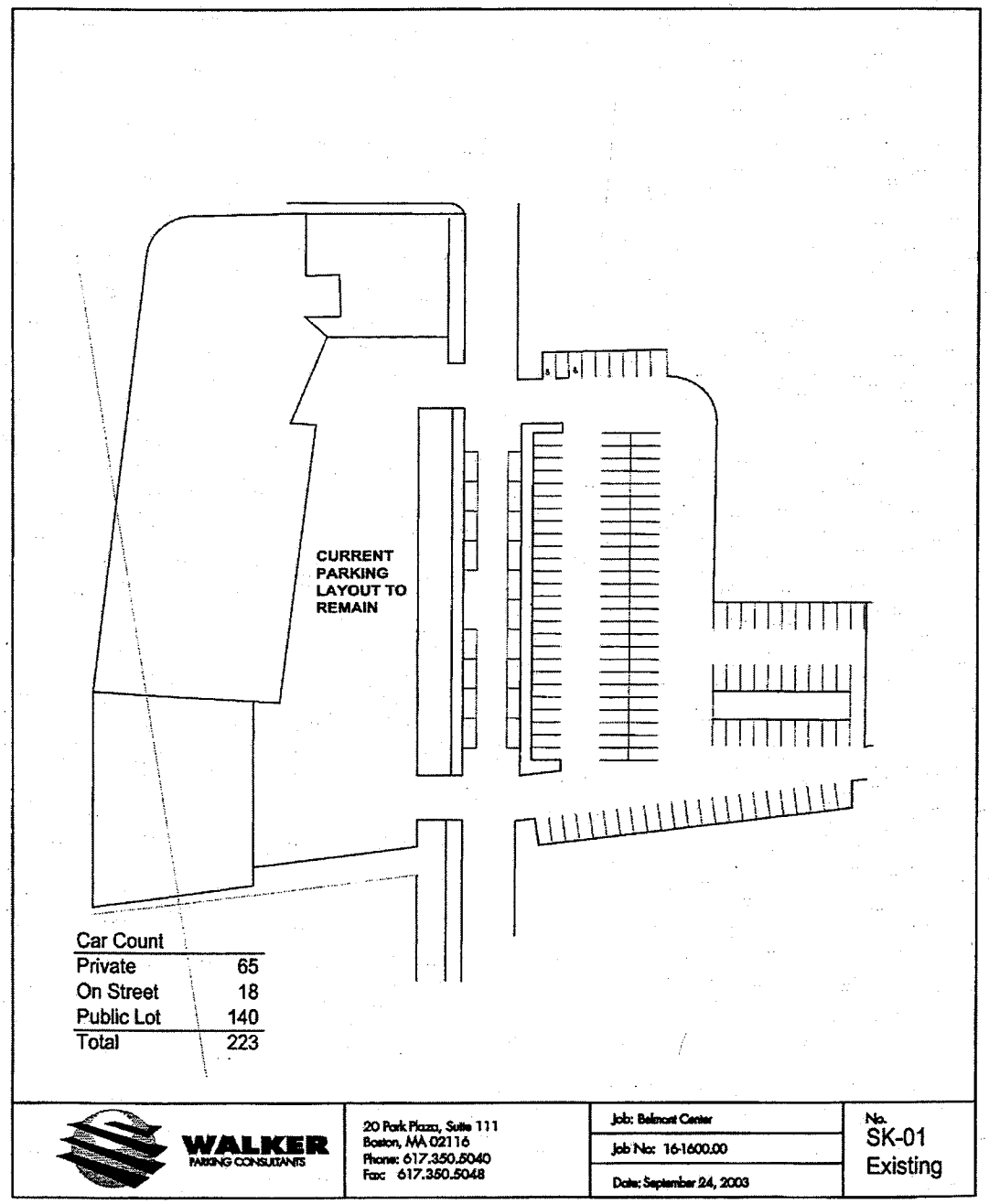
Overall, if the parking supply in the Center is insufficient after completing the low-to-medium cost steps outlined earlier, and if the questions and concerns outlined in this section are sufficiently addressed, The Committee would recommend that the Town consider building a parking facility within the Center, so long as they are aware of the potential benefits and drawbacks that may result. Such a parking facility could help meet current and future parking needs in Belmont Center and make the Center a more convenient and inviting place to shop.

Concluding Remarks

The committee recognizes the value of a vibrant commercial district and the importance of adequate parking to ensure its vitality. After careful considerations of all possible solutions, we believe we have crafted a prudent plan that strikes a balance between the parking needs in Belmont Center and the fiscal constraints imposed on the Town by its lengthy capital budget list. We urge the Selectmen to begin to act immediately on this plan to ensure the continued success of Belmont Center businesses and to enhance the quality of life for residents of the Town.

Appendix A Claflin Street Parking Area

Current Configuration (December, 2003)



Proposed Configuration: