

## **BELMONT HISTORIC DISTRICT COMMISSION**

During 2006 the Belmont Historic District Commission was once again fully engaged in preserving the character and fabric of Belmont's historic buildings and landscapes.

The Commission continued to work with the Board of Selectmen and other Town boards and agencies to preserve and rehabilitate Belmont's three historic fire stations. Engine One Urbanica successfully completed its exterior restoration of the Waverley Fire Station, the construction of five condominium units within the building, and the addition of a sixth unit in a new wing. Urbanica will voluntarily place a Preservation Restriction on the exterior of the building in early 2007 before any of the units are sold. As the winning bidder for the development of the Harvard Lawn Station, Urbanica is expected to continue to demonstrate its community-minded spirit by negotiating and signing a Design Review Agreement with the Commission. With regard to the Central Fire Station, the Commission looks forward to assisting the Burke Land Company in its effort to develop appropriate designs for the preservation and adaptive reuse of the building.

Within the Pleasant Street Historic District, the Commission continued to be involved in four major activities. First, through its representative on the Town Hall Complex Building Committee, Michael Smith, the Commission was pleased to assist that Committee in putting the final touches on the rehabilitation of the Complex, including lighting, traffic signage and bronze plaques that proudly indicate that the Underwood School Administration Building and the Homer Administration Building are listed on the National Register of Historic Places.

Second, the Commission continued to monitor the work on the Pleasant Street Reconstruction Project to ensure that the agreed-upon specifications for the appropriate reconstruction of historic stone walls would be followed in those sections where the road has to be widened. A summit meeting was held with the Town Engineer, the State highway engineer for the Project, and representatives from VHB and [town consultant firm] in order to make sure that all parties understood the specifications and agreed upon the manner of their implementation.

Third, the Commission was also busy fulfilling its core responsibility within the Historic District by assisting residents in preserving the historic character of their houses and landscapes and in making appropriate alteration and additions when necessary. Numerous public hearings were held during the year to discuss and/or review plans for changes and additions to six properties in the District and to cite historical precedents that might assist owners in designing these improvements. The Commission greatly appreciates the cooperation of the citizens who came before it since only a joint effort between the Commission and the residents can succeed in preserving the Town's architectural and scenic heritage.

To better serve these residents, the Commission continued its work in developing a revised, clearly defined set of guidelines for them to follow in maintaining and improving their houses. A revised draft of the guidelines is now ready for submission to an outside editor so that the guidelines can be refined for release in 2007.

Beyond the limits of the Pleasant Street Historic District, the Historic District Commission acted in its capacity as Belmont's historical commission, responsible for identifying historic resources throughout the Town and for working with the Board of Selectmen, the Planning Board and Town departments to plan for their protection. To that end, the Commission was involved in the following activities (in addition to helping to preserve the fire stations, as already mentioned):

First, the Commission continued to implement the Historic Preservation Agreement that the Town reached with McLean Hospital for developing specific zones within the existing campus by monitoring construction by Northland Residential Corporation within Zone 1A to confirm that it was in compliance with all terms of the Design Review Agreement and with all subsequent conditions attached to it so that a Certificate of Occupancy could be issued. Meetings will begin in 2007 with ARC and Brookdale (which acquired ARC in 2006) to review proposed alterations in the previously approved designs for Zone 3. Also, the Commission will continue to monitor construction of Olmsted Drive for compliance with the agreed upon terms for its design, the restoration of impacted landscapes, and the reconstruction of any stone walls that have to be moved.

Second, the Commission remained involved in an advisory capacity to the Planning Board regarding: (a) the planning process for the Trapelo Road Corridor Project, including the zoning changes for Cushing Square; (b) support of a citizen initiative for an Historic Accessories Building Bylaw that was brought before Town Meeting and defeated; and (c) the development of a demolition delay bylaw for Belmont.

Third, in response to requests from the Massachusetts Historical Commission for review and comment, the Commission examined two proposed projects for new telecommunications installations (20 Church Street and 380 Concord Avenue) and made recommendations for changes that might help the installations to blend in more effectively with their surroundings.

Fourth, to help introduce new residents to Belmont's heritage of distinguished older buildings and landscapes, the Commission participated in the Meet Belmont Fair at the High School in August. Member Nancy Richards answered questions and distributed literature to help owners of historic properties to maintain and protect their houses and landscapes.

A fifth involvement was to help with planning for the preservation and rehabilitation of Our Lady of Mercy Church and its Rectory, both of which have been determined to be eligible for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places by the Massachusetts Historical Commission. The Commission hopes to work in concert with the Board of Selectmen, other Town boards and agencies, neighborhood groups, the Archdiocese and the eventual developer(s) to achieve this goal. The Commission will assist in the development of a re-use plan that will preserve the Church and the Rectory, call for new residential buildings that would be compatible in size and scale with the retained church buildings and with existing residences in the surrounding neighborhood, and provide the Town with additional affordable housing.

In addition, the Commission supported a group of concerned citizens in their effort to preserve the Benton Branch Library by keeping it open.

There was one major disappointment during the year. The Commission failed in its effort to persuade the Belmont Hill School not to tear down the Rachel Raymond house. Erected in 1931 as one of the first International Style houses in New England, it was designed by Eleanor Raymond, who helped to pioneer modernism in America while practicing as one of the few women architects of that era. Had a demolition delay been in effect in Belmont, there might have been time to convince the School not to demolish the building, or at the very least, to postpone demolition pending further study of the merits of the building and of alternative solutions that would have been offered by the many preservation specialists, architects, art and architectural historians, alumni and other concerned citizens who had written the School on short notice, pleading to save the house. As it was, the School refused to release the report it had commissioned on the house, declined to meet with anyone other than the Commission's chairman, and carried out the demolition on the very day it received a permit to do so. No time was allowed for the calm, unhurried exchange of ideas that might have addressed and satisfied enough of Belmont Hill's concerns to have persuaded the School to save the house.

With regard to the Commission's membership, Paul Bell, Richard Cheek, and Rick Pichette were reappointed to the Commission by the Board of Selectmen in June.

To all the citizens who have helped to preserve Belmont's rich legacy of fine buildings, beautiful landscapes and other historic resources during 2006, the Commission wishes to express its great gratitude. We look forward to your continued advice and assistance in 2007.

Respectfully submitted,  
Richard Cheek, Co-Chairman  
Lydia Phippen Ogilby, Co-Chairman