

Interim report
Benton Library Reuse Committee
6/30/09

1. Introduction

In late March 2009, the Belmont Board of Selectmen appointed the Benton Reuse Committee “to advise it on reuse/disposition or preservation of the former Benton Library”. Beginning in April and continuing through June, the committee held nine public meetings, including one community input meeting and eight working sessions, which residents frequently attended. The Town posted the meeting notices in standard fashion, and in addition sent postcard and email notices to Benton abutters, members of the Friends of the Benton Library, members of the Oakley Neighborhood Association, and anyone else who asked to be on the email notification list.

Prior to formation of this Reuse Committee, the Friends of the Benton Library and the Oakley Neighborhood Association had produced a report containing all the community ideas for the reuse of the building and had submitted a summary of that report to the Board of Selectmen. This Committee received a copy of the full report, and distributed the summary again at its community input meeting.

2. History

Designed as a chapel by the architectural firm of Dull and Dallney, the Benton building was constructed in 1892 for the Belmont School for Boys, which had purchased the former Cushing-Payson estate as its campus. When the School was closed in 1899, the site remained unoccupied until it was bought by Col. Everett C. Benton in 1903. The Colonel moved his family into the mansion, Bellmont, and made the chapel available for public meetings. Among the building’s users were two new congregations, which organized themselves there before erecting and moving to the Payson Park Congregational Church in 1913 and the Belmont Methodist Church in 1921, respectively.

After the death of Col. Benton in 1924, and the demolition of the mansion in 1929, his widow Willena and her six children offered the chapel to the Town for use as a branch library. Their gift was made in the Colonel’s memory and in honor of his many public contributions as a member of the Governor’s Council, Belmont’s Town Meeting Moderator, and the donor of a public library to his hometown of Guildhall, Vermont.

Belmont accepted the chapel, made the necessary renovations to convert it to a library, and officially opened it as the Benton Branch Library on June 10, 1930. The Benton Branch remained in use until it was closed in January 2009, due to budgetary difficulties within the Town.

3. Architectural Significance

The Benton building is a rare example of a late 19th century country Gothic chapel built of rubblestone with a half-timbered and stuccoed entrance porch. It is notable for the fine craftsmanship devoted to its construction, as demonstrated by its carefully laid stonework, its sturdy oak-timbered entrance door with hand-wrought hardware, its

elegantly simple wrought iron rooftop cross, and its handsomely shaped arched interior beam work. Aside from the shelving that was subsequently introduced against the wainscoting, its interior remains almost untouched, a single, soaring space with a high cross-beamed “cathedral” ceiling that is bounded by a large arched Gothic window at one end and a raised semicircular apse at the other.

4. Zoning

This property is 6,033 square feet in size, making it a nonconforming lot within a Single Residence–C (SC–SRC) zoning district, which requires a minimum lot size of 9,000 square feet.

The nonconforming size of the lot makes the sale of the property inadvisable. There are two main reasons for this conclusion:

- (1) By-right conversion of the building to a residence would be expensive and would be confined to the renovation of the existing interior space. No expansion of the footprint would be allowed by current zoning, without significant zoning relief, and no outside changes would be allowed in order to preserve the exterior.
- (2) Demolition of the structure would not be economically viable because the size of the Benton lot prohibits the construction of a new single-family residence without a special permit. By right, any new residence would have to follow the existing footprint.

This zoning analysis shows that it does not make economic sense to tear down the building and rebuild in the same footprint. Therefore, the building should be kept.

Allowable non-residential uses of the building within a SR-C zone would be as an educational or religious facility, such as a nursery school, a day care center, or a church. Other potential non-educational or non-religious uses would require a special permit, are likely to entail greater costs to make the necessary renovations, and would not meet the neighborhood’s short list of acceptable and compatible uses.

Another limitation is the lack of off-street parking. This issue is very important to the residential character of this neighborhood and will need to be carefully and completely addressed by any prospective tenant.

5. Preservation

Because of its proud history of religious, civic, and educational service to the community, and because of its rarity as a surviving example of a beautifully-built, domestically-scaled country Gothic chapel from the Victorian era, the Benton building is eminently worth preserving and will shortly be declared eligible for nomination to the National Register of Historic Places by the Massachusetts Historical Commission. In addition, the zoning limitations cited above make it unwise economically to sell the building or to tear it down.

If the Town were to preserve the Benton building, there would be two major advantages. By leasing the building to a private party for a by-right use that benefits the community, with conditions attached to protect the exterior and to limit alterations to the interior, the Town will:

- (1) Keep the building in existence as a symbol of Belmont's civic, religious, and social heritage and as a significant work of architecture.
- (2) Retain ownership of the building so that it may be restored to use as a branch library at some point in the future, when improved financial conditions might allow the Town to make that choice.

6. Reuse

Benton has always served the community. It should continue to have a community-based use, but a use that relieves the Town of the expenses of maintaining the building. The goal is to find a reuse compatible with the neighborhood and the building itself. A nursery school, day care center, community center, or library are the reuses that have been publicly identified by the community as preferable and beneficial. These are also activities that can be appropriately housed within the existing space of the Benton, and can benefit from its special architectural atmosphere.

Any prospective tenant will need to prepare a parking and traffic plan (for inclusion with their response to the RFP) that will address all issues related to staff and customer parking, traffic, pick-up and drop-off.

Two nonprofit organizations whose representatives toured the building have already expressed interest in leasing the Benton: Melinda Weber of the Belmont Cooperative Nursery School, and Gail Erdos of Our Space, an educational center for children facing cancer.

The Benton should not be leased solely as a profit-driven business to maximize financial returns. This building should become an integrated and respectful partner of the Oakley neighborhood. If the Town breaks even in financial terms and the community is enhanced by the building's preservation with a compatible, "neighborhood-friendly" use, then this will be a successful reuse of Town property.

7. Renovations and Code Compliance

Any new use being considered for the Benton Building [other than as part of the Belmont Library system] will need some basic plumbing and electrical improvements for handicapped accessibility, for code compliance per the Massachusetts Architectural Access Board.

Depending on the proposed use and its specific code compliance requirements, more extensive life-safety, plumbing, electrical, and mechanical improvements may also be necessary.

The successful tenant will be responsible for:

- obtaining a Building Permit from the Belmont Building Department;

- renovating the building per building code requirements; and,
- obtaining an Occupancy Permit at the completion of the approved renovations.

The Town can help to subsidize the tenant's renovations with a "rent holiday" of some months built into the proposed lease, as is often done in real estate lease transactions. The goal is to get the tenant (and not the Town) to oversee and pay for the accessibility and code compliance improvements.

8. Building Operating Costs

There is no precise data on the historical costs of operations for the Benton building. Mr. Kevin Looney (Belmont Building Services Manager) projected that a facility in this building that would operate at approximately 40 hours per week would have annual operating costs in the range of \$18,000 to \$24,000. Therefore, the monthly operating cost range is likely \$1,500 to \$2,000. Mr. Looney estimates that this amount will cover all building operating costs and perhaps yield a small profit. While only an estimate, this range would be the basis for the proposed lease rates. Only after the initial lease period of a few years could the actual annual operating costs be more precisely determined. This, however, is a good starting point for developing a lease structure that meets the goals of the Town, the neighborhood, and the prospective tenants.

9. Summary & Recommendations

- a. The Benton building should be preserved, as an historic and architecturally significant building.
- b. It should be reused for a community-compatible function and use.
- c. The property should stay in Town ownership.
- d. The building should be leased.
- e. Renovations, for accessibility, building code compliance, and repurposing, should be undertaken by the tenant and the cost negotiated as part of a lease.

We recommend that the Board of Selectmen direct this committee to design a Request for Proposals (RFP) for the leasing of this building to an acceptable and compatible tenant.

--[end of report]---

Attachments

- Attachment A: Committee charge, from the Board of Selectmen.
Attachment B: Historical data sheet, Massachusetts Historical Commission, state inventory Form B from 1982-83 architectural survey.
Attachment C: Preliminary zoning analysis
Attachment D: Plot plan, Board of Assessors Map with Dimensions.
Attachment E: Benton Library Zoning Envelope Plan
Attachment F: Floor plan of Benton Library Building, Board of Assessors

Attachment A: Committee Charge

**BENTON LIBRARY REUSE COMMITTEE
(3/30/09)**

Committee Charge: To advise and assist the Board of Selectmen in an expeditious reuse/disposition or preservation of the former Benton Library that maximizes the use/revenue to the Town while preserving the residential character of the Benton Library neighborhood.

Committee Membership: Richard Cheek, Joe DeStefano, Nancy Forbes, Virginia Jordan, Andy Rojas

Committee Process: Meet and conduct one or more neighborhood meetings and gather input regarding neighborhood concerns.

Recommend key terms of a reuse/disposition/preservation of the former Benton Library in consultation with the Town Administrator and the Office of Community Development. The Committee shall provide an estimate of the cost to the Town in expense or revenue for each option considered.

After review and adoption by the Board of Selectmen of the terms and conditions of the recommended reuse/disposition and preparation of such by Town staff, the Committee shall complete and distribute a final report to the Board of Selectmen.

Timeline:	March 16, 2009	Committee formed
	June 30, 2009	Report submitted to the Board of Selectmen

Author: T. Younger

ARCHITECTURAL SIGNIFICANCE (describe important architectural features and evaluate in terms of other buildings within community)

The Benton Branch Library's architectural merit lies in its fully articulated Ecclesiastical form, appropriate for an Episcopal school chapel, executed in an informal country material suitable for Belmont. Its high quality craftsmanship is reflected in its carefully laid rubblestone exterior (see window surround--west facade), simple but elegant wrought iron work (see roof cross and entry light), and handsome wooden interior arches. Its continuing integrity, high standard of maintenance, and the fact that it is the only pre-1900 building in Precinct 6 which has not been inappropriately sided and/or moved speaks for the town's appreciation for the old school chapel.

HISTORICAL SIGNIFICANCE (explain the role owners played in local or state history and how the building relates to the development of the community)

The historical significance of the Belmont Memorial Library--Benton Branch building lies in its current existence a 1) a rare and well-loved survival from pre-suburban Belmont, 2) its history as an incubator building for several nearby congregations and 3) a successful early example of adaptive use.

The library was built in 1892 as the chapel for "The Belmont School for Boys, the management of which was in conformity to the principles of the Episcopal Church". (See Belmont Historical Society Newsletter listed below.) Among the donors to the building fund were Episcopal Bishops Phillips Brooks and William Lawrence.

Upon the discontinuation of the school after only 10 years in 1899, the fate of the entire Cushing-Payson estate which it had occupied became the subject of imaginative speculation. This ended in 1903 when the mansion, its outbuildings, and 15 surrounding acres were purchased by Col. Everett C. Benton for his family. During the Benton residency, which officially ended with the razing of the mansion in 1929, the chapel was made available for various types of public meetings. It served as an important incubator location for two local congregations who actually organized there: Payson Park Congregational Church in 1913 and Belmont Methodist Church in 1921.

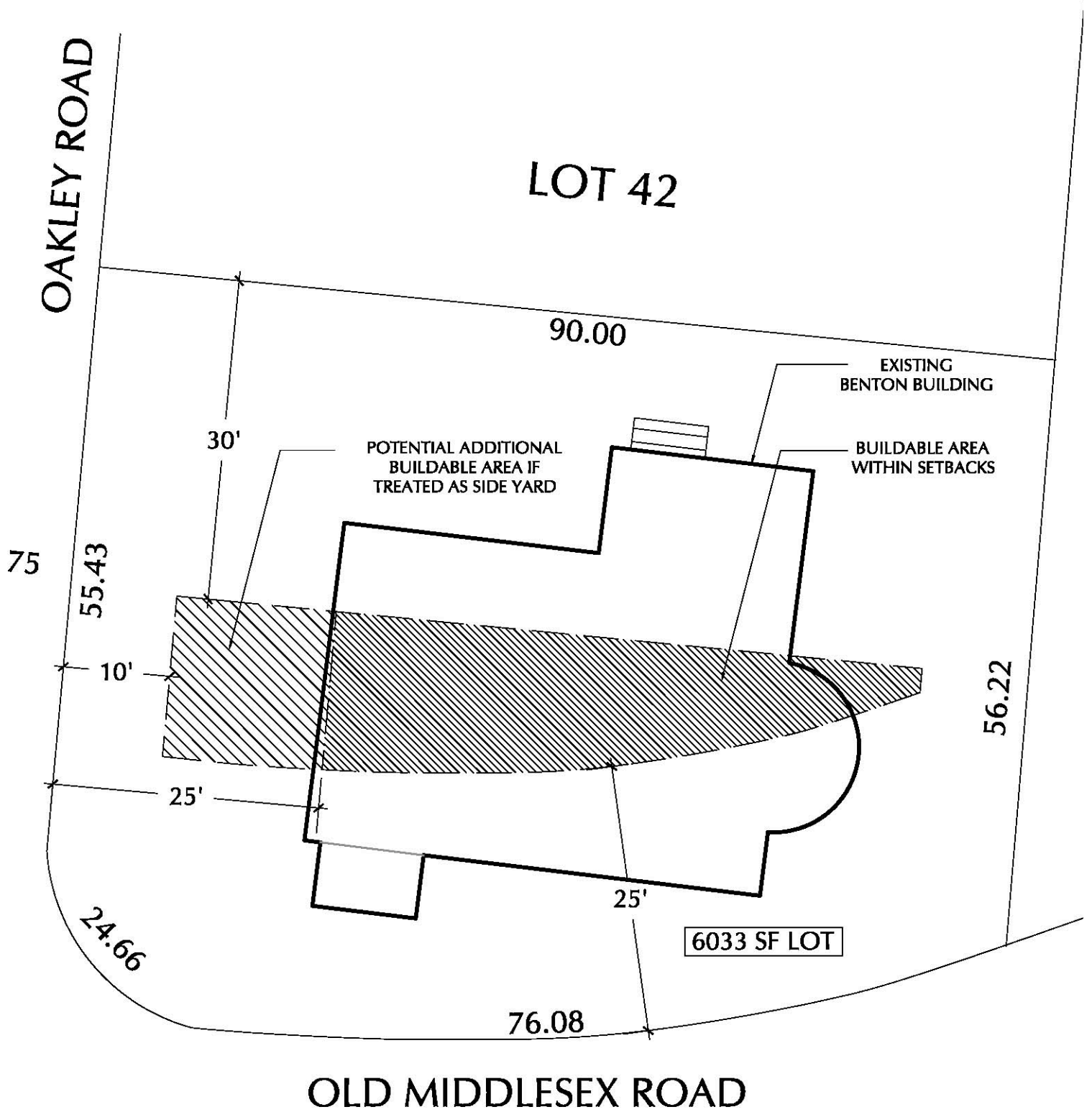
After the death of Col. Benton and the demolition of the mansion, his widow Willena and her six children offered the chapel to the town specifically for use as a branch public library. The town accepted it, providing the necessary repair costs to have it ready for opening June 10, 1930. The importance the Town of Belmont has historically placed in a solid public library system as well as its early willingness to experiment with adaptive use to insure the survival of a quality building from its past were thus demonstrated.

The Benton Branch Library meets Criteria A and B of the National Register.
 Bibliography and/or REFERENCES
 Benton, Nicholas. A Benton Heritage. Privately printed, 1964.
 Batty, Richard (ed.) Belmont Historical Society Newsletter, Vol. VII, No. 1, June 1973.
 "Dedication Exercises of Belmont Branch Library." The Belmont Citizen, June 14, 1930.
 Mahony, James. The History of the Belmont Public Library, 1868-1975. Unpublished, 1975.

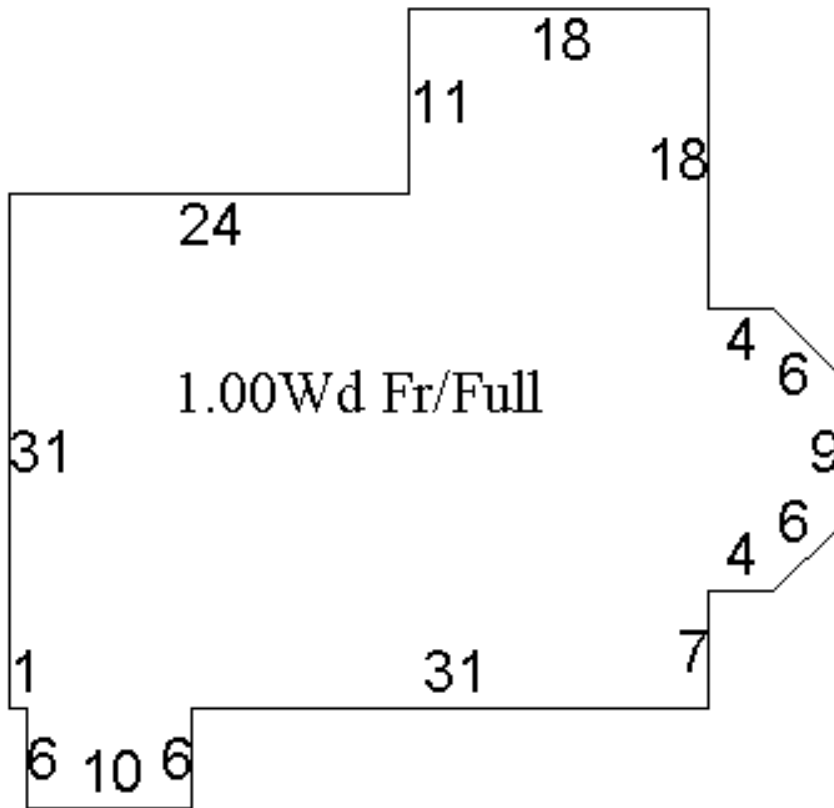
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Attachment C: Preliminary zoning analysis

BENTON BRANCH LIBRARY RE-USE			04.06.09
75 Oakley Road, Belmont MA			
<u>PRELIMINARY ZONING ANALYSIS</u>			
Zoning District: SC/SR-C - Single Residence 'C' District			
Allowable Uses Include: Single Family Dwelling			
<u>Dimensional Regulations & Existing Compliance</u>			
	Required	Existing	Proposed
Minimum Lot Area (SF)	9,000	6,033	
Minimum Lot Frontage (Feet)	75	100.74 / 80.09	
Maximum Floor Area Ratio (FAR)	NA	NA	
Maximum Lot Coverage (% of Lot)	25%	28.7	
Minimum Open Space (% of Lot)	50	70 +/-	
Dwelling - Minimum Front Yard Setback (Feet)	25	24 / 11	
Dwelling - Minimum Side Yard Setback (Feet)	10	24	
Dwelling - Minimum Rear Yard Setback (Feet)	30	13	
Other - Minimum Front Yard Setback (Feet)	25	NA	
Other - Minimum Side Yard Setback (Feet)	10	NA	
Other - Minimum Rear Yard Setback (Feet)	12	NA	
Maximum Building Height (Feet)	33	16 +/-	
Maximum Building Height (Stories)	2 1/2	1	
Parking (Spaces per Dwelling Unit)	2	0	
Other proposed uses may have additional parking requirements.			
Note: Building is on a corner lot and therefore may have more stringent front/side-yard setback requirements.			



Attachment F: Floor plan of Benton Library Building, Board of Assessors



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