

# **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**

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**Business and Economic Development Planning Group  
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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.

