

Belmont Citizens Forum

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A Newsletter for Belmont Residents

January 2001

Committee Seeks to Increase Recycling Rate

By Nancy S. Dorfman

With Belmont's seven-year contract with BFI for collection of household trash and recyclables expiring in June, the town needs to decide whether to expand its recycling program. My analysis of costs and revenues under the current waste-management plan (see page 3) indicates that the town last year netted almost \$200,000 from its recycling program, although there is no guarantee that recycling will remain profitable in the future.

A new town committee is to study the issue and help to develop a plan for managing solid waste through 2005. Following a presentation by an ad hoc group of citizens organized last May to promote recycling, the selectmen voted unanimously on November 6 to charter a temporary Solid Waste and Recycling Advisory Committee. In December, six members of the original ad hoc group plus two others were appointed to the committee. The members are Neal Brown and Ken Siskind (co-chairs), Joseph Curro, Janice Biederman, Kevin Brosnan, Nancy Davis, Mark Davis, and Fariba Cipriano.

Most of these people are interested in expanding recycling in order to protect the environment. Incineration of trash is a major cause of air pollu-

tion and of global warming. Using landfills as an alternative not only mars the landscape but may pollute subsurface water supplies. Removing hazardous waste such as mercury and PCBs from the waste stream before they enter the air or water supply is essential to maintain public health. Finally, reuse of products conserves resources and cuts down on pollution generated in the manufacture of new products.

Recycling Options Explored

One option the committee will explore is to recycle a wider range of products, such as junk mail, white paper, numbers 3 through 7 plastics, and cardboard boxes. The KTI facility in Charleston, where Belmont's recyclables are sent for processing and marketing, currently accepts all of these items from other towns, but they were not

Summary: Now that Belmont's solid waste contracts are due to expire, a new town committee must decide whether to expand the recycling program, a program that earned almost \$200,000 for the town last year.

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Recycling Appears to Be Good for the Town's

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specified in our present contract largely because of cost.

Encouraging residents to recycle more, through education and publicity, including programs in schools and other institutions, would also be effective. Another option is switching from biweekly to weekly pickups, which increased recycling by 30 percent in the town of Concord.

Some communities offer drop-off days and swap centers for exchanging rather than trashing throwaways. Because Belmont, unlike some towns, does not have an office dedicated specifically to recycling and waste management, volunteers would be needed to promote and staff such efforts, especially since town departments have been ordered to cut budgets this year by 3 percent. If there are profits to be gained by recycling, however, it might be of economic advantage to the town to invest in these activities.

About 90 communities in Massachusetts, including Concord and Worcester, have been attracted to the "pay to throw" option, and other communities, like Lexington, are considering it. Residents are charged according to the number of trash barrels they put out. Experience demonstrates that shifting

the cost away from the property tax base and adopting a fee-based system induces residents to throw away fewer items and recycle more.

New Solid Waste Contracts to Be Negotiated

Belmont currently has two solid waste contracts. The one with BFI, which expires in June, covers curbside collection of all solid waste, composting of curbside yard waste, and processing and marketing of recyclables. The new Solid Waste Committee plans to have a Request for Proposal for a new contract prepared by April 1 of this year.

The other contract, with Massachusetts Refusetech Inc. (MRI), covers incineration of trash at the waste-to-energy plant in North Andover. This contract, which accounts for almost 60 percent of the town's solid waste bill, does not expire until 2005.

Under the MRI contract, which the town entered into in 1985, Belmont must pay to dispose of approximately 15,000 tons of trash each year, regardless of whether that amount is actually delivered. The town currently sends a little less than 10,000 tons to the site, leaving it with about 5000 tons of unused capacity. Belmont is able to sell the excess to private haulers but the price per ton it receives is only about half the price it pays for it:

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Budget As Well As Good for the Environment

\$70 compared with \$130 per ton. To make matters worse, the \$130 it pays per ton for the capacity it does use is double the going rate.

It is obvious that expiration of the MRI contract in 2005 will open significant opportunities for reducing the cost of solid waste disposal, which, in turn, alters the financial advantages of recycling.

How Belmont Makes Money on Recycling

Whether the town gains or loses financially from recycling depends not only on what it pays to recycle but on the income generated by recycling, and what it would have cost to trash those same recyclables. When all these factors are taken into account, it appears that Belmont made a profit on recycling last year. Here's why:

Lower trash-collection costs. Without recycling, the town would have had to pick up and dispose of 2690 additional tons of trash. Opinions differ about how much that would have cost but, assuming that BFI would have charged us the same price per ton to collect recyclables as trash as it did

to collect the rest of our trash (see Table 1 on page 4), recycling saved the town \$63 per ton last year (\$623,812/9923 tons), or \$167,000. (There would be no additional savings on incineration charges, since, as noted, the town is already committed to paying MRI for more trash than it delivers.)

Excess capacity sales. We saw that under the town's incineration contract, Belmont must pay MRI to dispose of 15,000 tons of trash a year and if we produce less trash than that, we can sell the unused capacity to private haulers at the market rate (\$70 per ton last year). By diverting trash to recycling, Belmont freed up 2690 tons of capacity, which it sold for \$188,000.

Sale of newspapers. The income from this source varies from year to year. Last year, the town netted \$75,000, but it will earn nothing in 2001 because of the falling price of newsprint.

In summary, Belmont paid \$240,555 last year for collection and recycling of 2690 tons of newspapers and commingled containers. But it avoided trash collection costs and earned revenues from the sale of newspapers and of excess incinerator capaci-

What is Hazardous Waste?

Hazardous waste is anything containing mercury, such as fluorescent bulbs, thermometers, and thermostats; rechargeable, button, and other nonalkalide batteries; oil paint (unless dried out); lead in any form; most automotive products; insecticides; cleaning products; and anything else that carries a warning label.

These items should be kept out of trash bins for environmental and health reasons, although there is no law that requires residents to do so. Citizens may periodically cart these things to the Minuteman hazardous-waste facility in Lexington, which is open one Saturday a month from April through November. Forms and directions are available from the Belmont Board of Health, in the Town Hall Annex.

Net Cost of Recycling Compared with Alternative in FY 2000

Avoided cost of disposing of recyclables as trash (estimated)	167,000
Revenue from recycling	
MRI excess capacity sales	188,000
Recycled newspaper sales	75,000
Total benefits from recycling	<u>430,000</u>
Less amount paid to BFI for recycling	(240,555)
Net gain (estimate)	<u>\$189,445</u>

The Waste Stream At a Glance

Belmont's household solid waste can be divided into three categories:

Recyclables. This includes newspapers, phone books, and catalogues (which together make up 80 percent of the total weight of recyclables) as well as commingled containers (glass, metal, and numbers 1 and 2 plastic). All are delivered to the KTI recycling plant in Charlestown, where they are sorted and marketed. Revenues from the sale of plastic, glass, and metal containers are retained by BFI under the present contract.

Leaf and yard waste. Some is picked up at curbside and the rest is delivered privately to the transfer station, mostly by landscapers, who are charged a fee. The former is hauled to a compost center in Woburn, and the latter is disposed of, free of charge, by a private hauler.

All other solid waste. The rest, known as trash, is incinerated at the MRI plant in North Andover. Large metal items, including household appliances, are disposed of separately.

Well over half of our recycling tonnage consists of yard waste. Newspapers come next. Commingled containers make up less than 8 percent of the total.

ty that totalled \$430,000. The overall result was a net gain for the town of \$189,445.

A Short History of Belmont's Waste Management

Belmont used to incinerate its trash at a plant off Concord Avenue near the Lexington line. In 1975, after the state required the upgrading of landfills around incinerators, the town began to send its solid waste to an out-of-town landfill.

In 1985, as pressures built to cut down on landfill expansion, a consortium of 23 towns, including Belmont, agreed to underwrite the debt service and operating costs of a new waste-to-energy plant to be built by MRI in North Andover. In exchange, the towns would have their trash processed for 20 years. Each town was to pay yearly for disposal of a specified amount, at a price per ton that would vary depending on revenues from energy generated on site. With energy prices at peak levels in the 1970s, officials figured that such revenues would hold down disposal costs. Unfortunately, sagging oil prices depressed the price of energy, so the cost of disposal has risen and will continue to rise. Almost 60 percent of Belmont's \$2.2 million net solid-waste bill last year went to cover the cost of incineration.

Belmont began its first curbside recycling program in 1991, when the state banned the disposal of newspapers and commingled containers in landfills and incinerators. The state set a goal of recycling 42 percent of solid waste by 2000. Belmont reached that goal last year, but the state as a whole lags far behind.

Nancy Dorfman is an economist who lives in Belmont.

Grove Street Intersection Studied by TAC

By Sharon Vanderslice

Belmont's Traffic Advisory Committee (TAC) is looking at ways to improve the intersection of Grove, Bright, Blanchard, and Washington Streets in order to reduce the number of accidents there and make the area safer for pedestrians.

Currently, walkers must navigate the heavily traveled intersection, which lies on the border between Belmont and Cambridge, in order to reach the MBTA bus stop on Bright Road or the town playing fields on Grove Street. Belmont and Cambridge school buses also make stops nearby.

At the committee's January meeting, committee member Joel Douglas said accidents frequently happen at this location because drivers are confused about who has the right of way. Currently, motorists are supposed to yield to traffic coming out of Cambridge on Blanchard Road, but that is not always clear to drivers approaching the blinking yellow light at Bright or the stop signs at Grove and Washington.

Sergeant Ken Hamilton of the Belmont Police Department said two houses facing the intersection have actually been struck by cars. He also mentioned that the stop sign at Grove Street is difficult to enforce, because while the stop sign itself is in Belmont, some drivers who ignore it are crossing the town line into Cambridge, where Belmont police cannot issue tickets.

The TAC last proposed changes to the intersection in 1992, but they were never implemented due to lack of funds.

Last May, Susan Clippinger, head of the Cambridge Traffic and Parking Department, wrote to Belmont's Tom Gatzunis of the Office of Community Development and offered to pool resources with the town to improve the intersection.

Traffic consultants for both municipalities have suggested that the intersection be redesigned as two distinct T-shaped intersections (one at Bright and Washington and one at Grove and Blanchard) rather than the large existing four-way intersection. An obvious problem, consultants have said, is the width of the roadway, which was originally designed to accommodate trolley traffic as well as other vehicles. They recommend getting rid of "excess roadway" at the intersection by bringing the curbing further out into the street and perhaps building pedestrian refuge islands in the middle of the road. These changes would also shorten the crosswalks, an advantage for pedestrians.

Mark Paolillo, TAC Chair, said the committee will invite nearby residents of Bright, Washington, and Grove Streets to its March meeting to review two alternative designs for the intersection and to solicit other suggestions for improvements. Susan Clippinger said local Cambridge residents will also be invited to attend.

Environmental Designation Would Help Protect

Editor's note: State Representative Anne Paulsen, whose district comprises most of Belmont as well as East Arlington, is working to protect the ecology of the Alewife area. Existing development in the area contributes to flooding problems in the Winn Brook section of Belmont, exacerbates traffic tieups in town, and endangers wildlife. Along with a group of concerned citizens, she is exploring the possibility of having this watershed designated by the state as an Area of Critical Environmental Concern. Such a designation would not prevent development in the area, but it would require developers to meet certain environmental standards in order to minimize adverse impacts. In the following letter to the Belmont Citizens Forum, Representative Paulsen describes this effort in more detail.

The ACEC (Area of Critical Environmental Concern) program was established by the legislature in 1975 in order to identify and designate "areas of critical environmental concern and to develop policies for their protection and use." Since then, twenty-six ACECs have been designated across the state. The program is officially the responsibility of the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs, but management of the program has been delegated to the Department of Environmental Management.

The Alewife Reservation, which lies along the borders of Belmont, Arlington, and Cambridge, and the areas surrounding the reservation, which form the watershed of the Alewife Brook and also the Mystic River, are valuable resources in our urban setting. The areas provide habitats for birds and animals. The reservation is the beginning of a greenway west of Boston, from the Alewife reservation, through the open space at McLean, Rock Meadow, and on through the metropolitan State Hospital and into Waltham. Spy Pond, Fresh Pond, Little Pond, Clay Pit Pond, and Blair Pond all flow into Little River and Alewife Brook. Much of the storm water from the three bordering communities also flows into these ponds and streams, which cut through the reservation and join the Mystic River on its journey to Boston Harbor. What happens to the areas flowing into the reservation affects the quality of water in Boston Harbor.

The Alewife Reservation has long been neglected by the Metropolitan District Commission, which owns and manages the reservation. We have learned from studies of the water quality in Alewife Brook and the Mystic River that the water flowing from

Alewife, Says Representative Anne Paulsen

each of the communities contains sewage, which has contaminated the streams. It is clear that the natural resources, as well as the history of the area, require more attention. Creating an ACEC in this region helps to focus the attention of the state environmental agencies on public works agencies and private developers when work is undertaken either in the ACEC or outside the ACEC if the work affects the ACEC. It is also an incentive for communities to work together to solve problems rather than leave them at their borders. Everyone will know that the area has regional significance and is important to the health and vitality of the region.

But the only way to achieve a nomination from the state is through the efforts of individuals, the communities involved, and organizations, both private and public, that will create a coalition committed to the goals of an ACEC – the long-term preservation and stewardship of the designated areas.

The nomination does not prohibit development. It simply stipulates that any work to be done in this area must be fully studied under MEPA, regardless of whether minimum thresholds are exceeded, and that the work must meet high environmental standards.

Over the past few months, a group of citizens from the three communities decided to undertake the task of seeking the nomination. They have begun to determine ideas about the boundary of the proposed ACEC and to gather information about the resources. This will enable them to make clear the regional significance of the area.

But the process is just beginning. The ACEC nomination is a community process that needs the involvement of the many people who have an interest in the Alewife Reservation and the surrounding areas. I hope they will attend the public meetings to learn about the significance of the nomination as well as to reassure themselves that the nomination will not change the value of their property. The nomination application will demonstrate how the ACEC criteria have been satisfied and will set forth reasons why local officials, communities, organizations, and members of the public should lend their support.

Those of us who have been involved in the beginning phase of this process are certain that the

Alewife area is of regional significance, has animal and bird habitats that are worthy of preservation, and has historical significance that enhances its value for today and for the future. It is also an area that is under pressure by the growth around it.

I urge the Belmont Citizens Forum to support the application for the Alewife ACEC nomination and ask that individuals lend their time to perform research and to write the application. The nomination will be a valuable tool in preserving and enhancing the natural resources of our region.

—Anne Paulsen

Monitoring Water Quality

Mystic River Watershed

“A Year on the Mystic” is the topic of a program to be given by Tufts Professor Steve Chapra on February 21 at 7 p.m. in the Winchester Room in Winchester Town Hall. Chapra spent every day one year going out on the river to monitor water quality.

He is the second speaker in the Mystic River Watershed Association’s spring series.

For information about future programs in the series as it’s available, check the Watershed Association’s website: www.tufts.edu/mystic

McLean Files for MEPA Review

McLean Hospital has filed for state review of its development plans under the Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act.

To obtain a copy of the 3-inch-thick Environmental Notification Form, which contains detailed technical information about the proposed development and some of its effects on traffic and storm water runoff, call Delia Kaye at VHB in Watertown: (617)924-1770.

U. S. Supreme Court Declines Temple Case

The U. S. Supreme Court has declined to hear a challenge to the constitutionality of a Massachusetts law that allows zoning exemptions for religious organizations. The case was brought by Belmont residents opposed to the placement of the new 68,000 square-foot Mormon Temple in a residential neighborhood. The plaintiffs, who filed the case in state court in 1998, before the temple was constructed, maintained that the state's Dover Amendment violates the First Amendment of the Constitution by giving unfair advantages to religious institutions over secular ones. Churches should not be allowed to override local zoning rules without a special permit, the plaintiffs argued.

So far, both the state court and the U. S. First Circuit Court of Appeals have upheld the 1950 zoning law. In its decision last May, the appeals court said that the Dover Amendment represents "a secular judgment that religious institutions ... are compatible with every other type of land use and thus will not detract from the quality of life in any neighborhood." The U. S. Supreme Court made no comment on the case.

A separate case, pertaining to the height of the temple's spire, has been appealed by the Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints. A Middlesex Superior Court judge ruled last February that the spire could not exceed the town's normal height limit of 67 feet. This struck down a 1997 decision by Belmont's Zoning Board of Appeals that would have permitted a lighted 139-foot spire. Oral arguments were heard by the Appeals Court in January.

--Sharon Vanderslice

IRS Says Belmont Citizens Forum Is Educational Group

The Internal Revenue Service has ruled that the Belmont Citizens Forum is qualified to receive tax-deductible donations as a charitable and educational organization under section 501(c)(3) of the Internal Revenue Code.

The approval, received in December 2000, is retroactive to the Forum's application in the fall of 1999 for 501(c)(3) status. This means that all donations to the Forum since its inception are tax-deductible.

McLean Site Plans Ready for Public Review

A series of four public hearings to review site plans for the McLean development begins on January 30. The first hearing will focus on the development as a whole, the second on the condominium townhouses, the third on the retirement community, and the fourth on the research-and-development complex. If the issues at any hearing cannot be covered in one evening, they will be discussed on another night.

Topics to be discussed may include traffic mitigation, architectural design, environmental protection, archaeology, water and sewage lines, storm-water runoff, blasting, lighting, and noise restrictions. Citizens with questions or concerns about any of these issues should take this opportunity to speak up.

After the hearings are completed, the town's Planning Board will decide whether to approve the developers' site plan applications.

Planning Board Hearings Scheduled

Public Hearing #1: Development as a Whole
Tuesday, January 30 7 p.m.
Town Hall, Selectmen's Meeting Room

Public Hearing #2: Townhouses
Thursday, February 1 7 p.m.
Town Hall, Selectmen's Meeting Room

Public Hearing #3: Retirement Community
Tuesday, February 6 7 p.m.
Town Hall, Selectmen's Meeting Room

Public Hearing #4: R & D Complex
Tuesday, February 27 7 p.m.
Town Hall, Selectmen's Meeting Room

Why is Belmont Broke? *continued from page 12*

1980 tax-cutting referendum that held down property taxes. With many costs, such as salaries, health insurance, and utilities, growing faster than 2½ percent, the Prop 2½ referendum was designed to require cuts in services or tax overrides to continue the same level of services. As a result, property taxes (adjusted for inflation) have declined.

In the first few years after Prop 2½ took effect, Massachusetts increased state aid to the cities and towns to make up the difference. Then, when the 1988 recession struck, the state could no longer afford so much help. Like other cities and towns, Belmont had to survive on less. The drastic cuts in town services date from that period.

Still, though state aid formulas are designed to give more help to poorer cities, Belmont does receive a substantial sum; it will get an estimated \$7.7 million next year, about 12 percent of the town's revenues.

Some people argue that our shortage of money is due to the residential nature of this peaceful town. Residents cost the town money, especially those who have children to educate. Only about 7 percent of Belmont's property tax revenue comes from taxes on commercial property. All the rest is from taxes

on residential property. We'd be much better off, it's argued, if we had more commercial ventures to share the tax burden.

But commercial development is no cure for ailing municipal finances. True, office buildings and nursing homes don't add to the number of school children, but they make large demands on other town services. Road improvements to cope with the increased McLean traffic will cost many millions of dollars. A dozen intersections need to be improved, in addition to the two being paid for by the hospital. Fire and rescue services for the McLean development are likely to swell by half a million dollars or more a year. Though Belmont forecasts new property tax revenues from McLean starting in 2005, it is far from certain that there will be any net increase, once the cost of services to the development is deducted from those revenues.

This is a sad truth that many other communities have faced before us. Arlington's town planner, Alan McClennen, said he's learned not to count on any increase in net revenue from new development, even though developers often dangle that carrot. O'Neill Properties, owner of the Belmont Uplands at Alewife, is already making promises based on revenues, provided that we agree to rezone their land. But their calculations don't consider the cost to homeowners of flooded basements and other damage.

It's theoretically possible, of course, for a community to choose exactly the right development package that would result in a net fiscal surplus, even after accounting for all expenses. It's even theoretically possible for that development package to be so benign in terms of traffic and the environment that it would be all benefit and no loss. But the usual circumstance is that a town looking for easy money is persuaded by a more sophisticated developer to accept unfavorable terms.

Why, for example, did we ever agree to cap the McLean developers' responsibility for mitigating traffic? The Memorandum of Agreement identifies 14 intersections as needing mitigation. Why shouldn't the developers pay the full cost of fixing all 14? The answer, of course, is that we were so dazzled by the offer of a "free" cemetery and open space that we forgot the old adage that there's no free lunch.

continued on next page

Warrant Committee Budget Forum

**Wednesday, January 31
7:30 p.m.**

**Chenery Middle School
Auditorium**

Preliminary budgets for the coming fiscal year will be presented by Town Administrator Mel Kleckner and Superintendent of Schools Dr. Peter Holland. Questions and comments from the public are welcome as department heads explain where cuts may be necessary. The general public is invited and Town Meeting Members are strongly urged to attend.

We need you.

If you can volunteer even a few hours a month, you can make a difference. You do not need to be an expert—just a person who cares about our town.

I can devote time to:

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- Environmental Protection
- Planning & Zoning
- Traffic & Transportation
- Mailings
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Name _____

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Make checks payable to Belmont Citizens Forum and mail to Belmont Citizens Forum, P.O. Box 609, Belmont MA 02478. Thank you!

Why is Belmont Broke? *continued from page 11*

As we're now beginning to learn, if you don't pay in cash up front, you pay in hidden charges later.

A third explanation for Belmont's apparent poverty is that the town really isn't as rich as it seems. We're often lumped with well-off Boston suburbs like Boxborough, Acton, Newton, Lexington, Wellesley, Concord, Manchester, Cohasset, Medfield, Sudbury, Winchester, Wayland, Weston, Duxbury, Lincoln, Sherborn, Carlisle, Dover. Like them, our property taxes are more than twice the state median average.

Of course, we know that all Belmont residents aren't affluent. One marker of economic diversity in a town is thought to be multi-family housing. It's generally believed that those living in two- and three-family houses are less well-off financially than those living in single-family houses. If that is true, Belmont is more economically diverse than those

communities. It has more multi-family housing than any of them: 38 percent of our residential parcels. But multi-family housing may not be the marker for economic diversity that it used to be. Many two-family houses in Belmont are now owned, not by blue-collar workers, but by high-tech professionals more interested in good schools than in low property taxes. The poor in Belmont are, likely as not, older couples or widows living in single-family houses they bought 40 years ago for \$25,000—houses now worth close to \$700,000, and taxed accordingly.

Communities around the state have faced these problems. Some solved their budget crunches simply by passing a Prop 2½ override. Proposition 2½ was designed not to keep taxes going ever lower but merely to make sure that the voters could weigh the proposed expenditures and decide whether they were worth the price. That is the job we'll all face in the next several months.

—Sue Bass

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Address Service Requested



People Are Asking

Why is Belmont Broke?

Belmont is facing an enormous budget shortfall. To keep the town's services at about the present level will cost nearly \$68 million next year. However, Belmont's revenue for the next fiscal year, which begins on July 1, is expected to be only \$65.3 million. Debate in the coming months will focus on how to deal with the \$2.6 million gap. How much can we cut back on services? Can we get more state aid when the state itself is facing a budget crunch? Should we consider an override of Proposition 2½, raising taxes to avoid painful cuts in services?

Services are already worse than you'd expect in a comfortable suburban town. Last fall, at a meeting with selectmen sponsored by the League of Women Voters, a resident of Louise Road asked how long she'd have to wait for repairs to her sidewalk, which has cracked and crumbled to the point where it's muddy in spring and becomes a grass plot in the

summer. She said those sidewalk repairs had been on the list for six years. Bill Monahan, chairman of the Board of Selectmen, said the backlog of sidewalk repairs was running about seven years. Yet this deplorable level of service would be cut further under the balanced budget recommended by the town administrator.

Why? Why can't Belmont afford to repair sidewalks a few months after they break up, rather than seven or eight or nine years later? Why are we forced to eliminate eleven teachers and counselors from the school department payroll and increase class sizes accordingly? Why does the library propose to reduce its hours next year, eliminating Sunday hours in the winter and even Saturday hours in the summer? Those are pretty basic services, not what most people would consider frills. Why can't Belmont afford them?

One answer people give is Proposition 2½, the

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