

Belmont Citizens Forum

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A Newsletter for Belmont Residents

July 2001

Historic Commission Fights to Preserve Annex

By Sharon Vanderslice

The fate of the 1898 Belmont High School building (now the Town Hall Annex) was thrown in doubt earlier this year when a town committee suggested that it could be demolished and replaced with a three-story, flat-roofed modern building.

Belmont is under federal court order to make its municipal buildings accessible to the handicapped, and the Town Hall was renovated last year to comply with the Americans with Disabilities Act. Before committing to a full-scale renovation of the Annex, however, the selectmen appointed a Town Hall Complex Advisory Committee to study the program needs of the town's administrative departments in a comprehensive way and present options for meeting those needs.

So far, with the assistance of the Boston architectural firm Donham & Sweeney, five options have been developed, three of which involve demolition.

Alarmed at the prospect, Belmont's Historic District Commission has nominated the old school to be included in the 2001 Ten Most Endangered Historic Resources List, published yearly by Historic Massachusetts Inc.

Ornamental Brickwork Praised

Local architects regard the building as a treasure. According to Richard Cheek, co-chair of the commission, its design echoes the Queen Anne style of the Town Hall, but in a more subdued way. "It's rich, but not overly done," concurred Paul Bell, a partner in the Boston architectural firm of Shepley

Bulfinch Richardson Abbott, and also a member of the commission.

In its application to Historic Massachusetts, the commission described the exterior of the Annex as "a distinguished example of the intricate ornamental brickwork for which Boston had become nationally famous by the end of the 19th century." In particular, it noted the "six differently-shaped brick mouldings" above the main entrances, the "exquisite egg-and-dart moulding" in the window and door arches, and the "diamond pattern" of light and dark bricks just below the eaves, which, it said, was reminiscent of some of the great country houses of England. The building is also beautifully decorated with iron, copper, limestone, and granite and rests on an eight-foot-high splayed base that gives the whole structure a feeling of solidity. *continued on page 4*

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Recycling Program Picks Up Mixed Paper and Plastics

By Nancy S. Dorfman

On June 4, the Board of Selectmen approved a new three-year contract for the collection and transportation of solid waste, yard waste, and recycling. The new contract adds plastics 3 through 7 and mixed paper to recyclables, beginning on July 1. Although there is no further charge for the additional items, the total bill of \$1,365,240 in FY 2002 will be 31 percent above that in FY 2001 because of higher costs. The contract with the low bidder, Russell Disposal Inc., includes two one-year options for renewal and replaces the BFI contract, which expired on June 30 after seven years.

With the addition of plastics 3 through 7 to recycled items, Belmont residents are now required to place in their recycling bins all household food and beverage containers made of plastic, glass, or metal, except plastic bags and Styrofoam and aseptic containers (such as juice boxes). Motor oil or chemical containers and flower pots are not recyclable.

Although the new plastics added to the list constitute only about 15 percent of all plastic household containers, experience shows that when people can toss all containers into the bin, the recycling



rate for plastics 1 and 2 tends to rise as well.

Mixed paper includes paperboard (all cardboard other than corrugated and aseptic containers), white and colored paper, envelopes, and junk mail, in addition to the newspapers, phone books, catalogs, and magazines collected before. All of these must go into paper bags for disposal; they do not need to be separated by type. The contract gives the town the option of adding corrugated cardboard and aseptic containers at an additional cost on the anniversary date of the contract. Only corrugated cardboard is being considered at this time, however, because aseptic containers do not recycle well.

The contract was approved at the recommendation of Highway Superintendent Peter Castanino and the Solid Waste and Recycling Advisory Committee, whose members spent many hours preparing the Request for Proposals (RFP) and reviewing the five proposals (out of 18 mailed) that were returned.

The Advisory Committee will next turn its attention to educating citizens about the recycling program, with the aim of improving the town's recycling rate. While recycling obviously contributes to the quality of the environment, another benefit is that it creates excess capacity at the incinerator, which Belmont can then sell to other towns. (See the January *Belmont Citizens Forum*.)

Nancy Dorfman is an economist.

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Alewife Plans Call for 4000 New Parking Spaces

Dozens of acres of undeveloped land around the Alewife T station have changed hands recently and the new owners have big plans for these properties.

Approximately three million square feet of commercial and residential development has been proposed, some of which is currently under construction. This is in addition to the two million square feet already built in the area. Plans call for a net gain of over 4000 new parking spaces near an intersection that is already one of the worst bottlenecks in the state. Each space represents about three car trips a day (for a total of 12,000 new trips).

Activists in Arlington and Belmont are opposing the development because of concerns about traffic and increased flooding, and because of the threat to wildlife. Office buildings are expected to tower over the wetlands that are now part of the Metropolitan District Commission's Alewife Reservation. In addition, the City of Cambridge has plans to reroute all its stormwater from the Fresh Pond area through the reservation, increasing the possibility of flooding during heavy storms.

In the summer issue of a newsletter published by Alewife Neighbors, Inc., Lew Weitzman wrote that the planned development "would rank as one of the largest single build-outs in Cambridge history, comparable in square footage to such projects as the Cambridgeside Galleria Mall area, University Park at MIT, or South Boston's highly publicized Pritzker waterfront development project."

Here is a list of projects he cited:

1. Genetics Institute, a division of American Home Products of New Jersey, is completing construction of a 215,000-square-foot, 85-foot-high office tower, with more than 300 parking spaces.

2. Oaktree Green Development, LLC, of Cambridge, and Abbott Investments, LLC, of Boston, are completing the steel frame of a 366,000-square-foot, 85-foot-high apartment complex with 345 parking spaces behind the Summer Shack Restaurant. When completed, it will be one of the largest residential structures in Cambridge, with 311 units.

3. Bulfinch Cos., of Needham, has purchased the Arthur D. Little site and announced plans to build approximately 900,000 square feet of offices on land currently leased to A. D. Little. The plans include two new above-ground parking garages, which will hold 1,052 cars.

4. Martignetti Brothers Real Estate, of Cambridge, (owners of the bowling alley) have announced plans to construct approximately 400,000 square feet of housing (350 units) and a 125,000-square-foot office building, while retaining their motel (Susse Chalet) along Route 2. A total of 788 new parking spaces would be added.

5. O'Neill Properties, of Philadelphia, is currently negotiating with Belmont officials to build upwards of 200,000 square feet of office space and at least 600 parking spaces on its 12.2 acres abutting Route 2 near Lake Street.

6. Mugar Enterprises, Inc., of Boston, has announced plans to build on a 17-acre site across Route 2 from the bowling alley with 300,000 square feet of offices and 1,150 parking spaces. After a storm of protest from Arlington and Belmont residents, Secretary Bob Durand of the Massachusetts Environmental Protection Agency decided to require a full environmental review of this project. That review is now underway.

7. W. R. Grace Company, of Columbia, Maryland, has proposed an office park and hotel/retail development on its 27-acre site next to Russell Field. These buildings would add 400,000 square feet of development and 837 parking spaces to the site.

A committee of Belmont residents is forming to study ways to preserve open space in the Alewife area. If you're interested in investigating alternative uses for these properties, please call (617) 484-5057.

This article includes excerpts from 02140, Volume 3, Issue 1, reprinted with permission from Alewife Neighbors, Inc.

Architectural Quality Impossible to Duplicate,

Continued from page 1

An asymmetrical arrangement of dormers and doors and a steeply-pitched slate roof add to the old school's appeal.

"No way could we design a building with this kind of detail today, nor could the town afford to pay for it," said commission member Arleyn Levee, a recent winner of the Frederick Law Olmsted Award for historic landscape preservation.

"Belmont Center would be architecturally, visually, and historically poorer," wrote the preservation consultant Sara Chase, "if the Town Hall Annex were demolished."

Commission members argue that gutting and redesigning the interior of the Annex while preserving the exterior of the building is the most sensible approach.

"I think this building is in phenomenally good shape," said Michael Smith, an architect and president of Equus Design Group in Cushing Square. "I can't think of a single building that I know of that

would be as simple to renovate as this one."

Co-chair Richard Cheek, a well-known architectural and landscape photographer, worries that demolition of the Annex would set a bad precedent for the neighborhood. It would fail "to honor the recent efforts of private citizens to restore their own buildings, especially those in the immediate vicinity of the Town Hall Complex," he wrote to Historic Massachusetts. The Belmont Woman's Club and the Lion's Club have recently completed historic roof renovations at considerable expense. McLean Hospital, too, has agreed to restore some of its historic buildings with guidance from the commission.

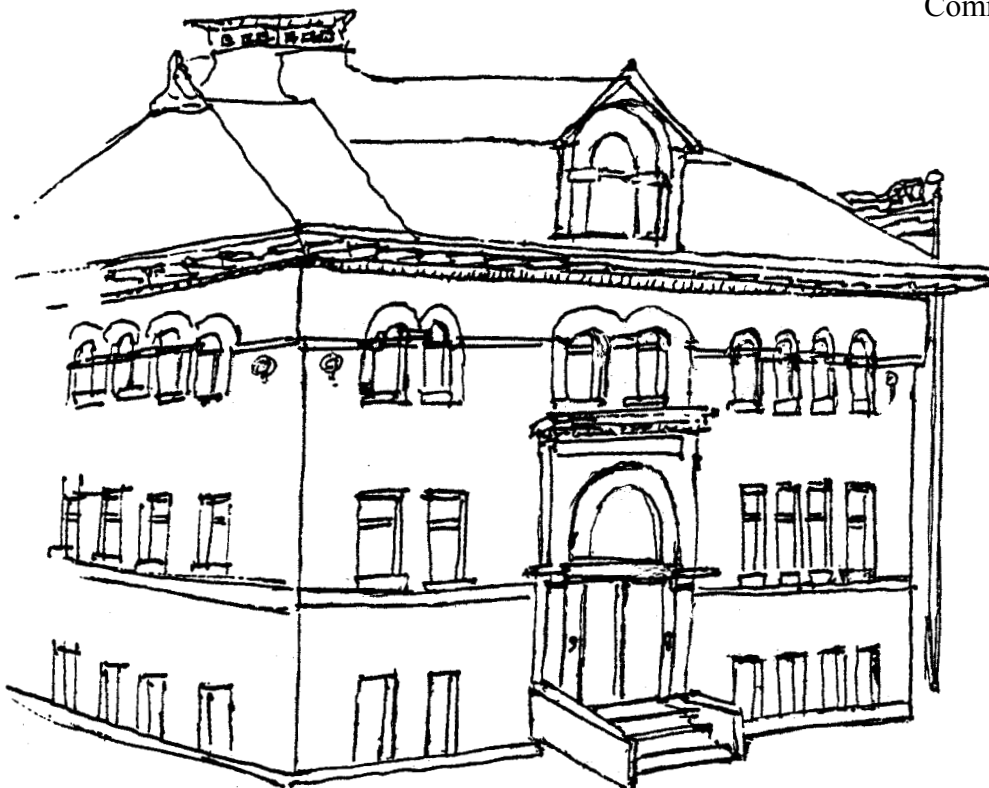
Keeping Up the Neighborhood

Cheek argues convincingly that building owners in the historic district would be "less willing to cooperate with a town commission that is unable to persuade the Town itself to abide by the same strictures."

Caretakers of two historic districts on Pleasant and Common Streets, comprising a total of about 80 properties, the Historic District

Commission is charged with preserving, promoting, and developing the historical assets of the town.

Under a Belmont bylaw, the commission must approve any changes to the exterior of buildings in an historic district, including windows, doors, walls, roofs, chimneys, trim, porches, fences, driveways, walkways, garden structures, light fixtures, paint colors, as well as the installation of accessories like



TOWN HALL ANNEX

Gut Renovation Advocated as the Best Course

window air conditioners, skylights, solar panels, antennae, and signs. This applies to virtually all the houses on Pleasant Street between Stella Road and the Clark Street Bridge as well as nearby properties on Somerset and Moore Streets, Centre Avenue, Sunnyside Place, Wellington Lane, and Concord Avenue. It also applies to the stone railroad bridge in Belmont Center, the former train station on Common Street (now owned by the Lion's Club), the Wellington Station, and the war memorial. Some of these properties are eligible to apply for preservation grants from the Massachusetts Historical Commission.

Among the most prominent structures in the Pleasant Street district are the 1881 Town Hall designed by Hartwell and Richardson, the 1900 Underwood Library (now the School Administration Building) designed by William R. Emerson, and the 1898 Belmont High School building (now the Annex) designed by a Belmont native Eleazar B. Homer. Lydia Ogilby, co-chair of the Historic District Commission, recently described these three buildings as “the nuclei of the town.”

Located adjacent to the main business district and across the street from the MBTA commuter rail station, they house most of the town's administrative offices. Geographically and politically, they are the center of Belmont. And, in an architectural sense, preservationists say, they help to define the character of the town.

In March, *The Boston Globe* described them as “some of the prettiest municipal buildings in New England.”

Town Meeting Vote Required

The Annex was put into the Pleasant Street Historic District by a vote of Town Meeting in 1996. A two-thirds vote of Town Meeting would be required to remove it from the district before it could legally be torn down.

On April 23 of this year, Town Meeting approved a vision statement for the town, which, among other things, committed us to preserving the beauty and character of our historic buildings “as witnesses to our past.” Whether this legislative

body would agree as early as September to demolish a previously protected building is questionable.

At least one of the three selectmen believes the building is worth saving. Anne Marie Mahoney said at a selectmen's meeting in March that she could not vote to take it down. “The Annex is part of the history and the heritage of the town and I believe that preserving that history outweighs the pressures of expedience and cost effectiveness. . . I personally find the architecture of the Annex building to be beautiful, even though it is currently out of fashion. If we take it down like the Olive Block, it's gone forever.” [The Olive Block was a half-timbered Tudor block of stores on Leonard Street. Like the Annex, it was designed by Eleazar Homer and housed Olive's drug store, a barbershop, a bank, a tailor, and a dance hall. It was razed in 1968 to make room for the Belmont Savings Bank.]

Renovation Option Is Less Expensive

Current cost estimates appear to favor renovation of the Annex.

Donham & Sweeney did a cost comparison, dated June 27, of two of the construction options: Option B, a new building, and Option E, a gut renovation of the existing building. Option B would cost \$11 million; Option E, \$9.5 million.

Some department heads support the new building because, according to the most recent estimate, it would provide 2,514 more square feet of usable office space (17,567 for Option B compared with 15,053 for Option E). Unfortunately, it would also have a larger footprint than the old building, and lack the wide hallways, high ceilings, and visual interest of the 1898 structure.

One of the town's design objectives is to create a more park-like setting in and around the complex. Everyone agrees that the sea of asphalt around the Annex as it stands today does nothing to enhance the beauty of the building. Both options would provide more green space than exists now—reducing the number of outside parking spaces from 72 to 42. (Ten of these would be reserved for visitors.)

The new building, however, could accommo-

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Town Hall Annex, continued from page 5

date an additional 31 parking spaces underground, reducing the need for off-site employee parking.

“Parking is an unending need,” said Tadhg Sweeney of Donham & Sweeney, who previously drew up plans for a proposed renovation of the Cambridge City Hall. The current Annex lot includes 12 illegal spaces, yet still does not provide all the spaces that employees would like. Leasing additional employee parking in nearby church lots has been discussed.

Richard Cheek noted that the town is not obligated to provide on-site parking for all of its employees. Commuters to Boston often park blocks from their offices.

If beautification of the area is the goal, Cheek maintains, then tearing down a building of this quality defeats the purpose.

Use of Nearby Buildings Considered

The Town Hall Complex Advisory Committee is considering housing some town employees in

other municipal buildings. Construction options B and E both call for renovating the vacant top floor of the Town Hall to reclaim an additional 2,150 square feet of office space. The Historic District Commission has suggested using vacated space inside the Municipal Light Building as well.

To avoid the expense of renovating the School Administration Building to comply with ADA regulations, the selectmen may choose to sell it to a private owner or mothball it for an undetermined period of time.

Much remains to be decided, but that must be done fairly soon. Joel Mooney, acting chair of the Town Hall Complex Advisory Committee, said that the court expects to see a definite plan of action by October.

Regardless of whether the Annex is renovated or replaced, Belmont voters will have to pass a debt exclusion to help pay for it, or risk putting town offices on the street.

Sharon Vanderslice is a Town Meeting Member from Precinct 2.



Belmont High School Circa 1898

The structure we now call the Town Hall Annex was originally built in 1898 to house the town's growing high school population. The high school was located in a small wooden building on School Street, above what is now the Underwood Playground, but by 1896 had become so crowded that some students were required to sit behind the master's desk, and two classes were sometimes carried on simultaneously in the same room. School officials also complained of poor lighting and a complete lack of laboratory space.

The new high school on Moore Street, declared the School Committee, would be "an ornament to the town" and help make the town's educational system "the peer of that of other progressive communities around us." The structure contained six classrooms, two recitation rooms, laboratories, a gymnasium, and an assembly hall, in addition to office space for teachers and the superintendent.

This grand physical expansion of the high school paralleled a similar expansion in the curriculum. Under the direction of a newly hired Superintendent of Schools, students were for the first time given the chance to choose elective courses in addition to their required class work. Less time was spent on Latin and Greek and more on English literature and the sciences. Laboratory space allowed the students to carry on "individual investigation according to scientific methods" instead of merely memorizing terminology. Everyone was required to take choral music, in the hope that they would be able to "sing a piece of music at sight," just as they would "read a book from the library."

With the construction of a gymnasium, physical education, which the superintendent felt was essential

in an increasingly urban environment, could be offered for the first time. "When we have met nature's requirements, in regard of physical well being," he wrote, we can expect "more rapid development of mental power."

Two years later, the physical education teacher proudly announced that she had measured increased lung capacity in every pupil. A student exhibition given in 1899 demonstrated "free exercises, club swinging, dumb-bell, ring and wand drills, and a game of basketball." The high school girls' and boys' basketball teams were first formed in this build-

ing that same year.

The schools' first libraries and lunch programs also date to this time.

Perhaps as a result of these improvements, enrollment at the high school jumped to 84 students, with one of every three grammar school students continuing into secondary school. At least two hours of homework a night were required. Those who stayed long enough to graduate from Belmont High generally went on to higher education. Each year, some attended Harvard, Radcliffe, or MIT.

Most students walked to school, which began at 8 a.m. with opening exercises and singing in the assembly hall. Those arriving with wet feet could dry out next to large radiators in the hallways. Snow days were announced by a series of bells rung at the Unitarian church.

Despite what seem like quaint customs to us today, portions of the superintendent's reports sound remarkably familiar. He lauds Belmont parents for their "kindly interest and hearty cooperation" in their children's education, thanks the community for its

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*"The love of what is good and beautiful
and true is a more sure safeguard against vice
than a knowledge of what is evil,
be it ever so scientific."*

George P. Armstrong, Superintendent of Schools, 1897

Left: The 1908 Belmont High School baseball team included center fielder, Watson Flett (top row, left), who later became Chairman of the Belmont Board of Selectmen and remained in the position for forty years.

Pleasant Street To Become Three Lanes Wide

By Sharon Vanderslice

To accommodate the additional traffic that will result from the proposed McLean development, Belmont's Traffic Advisory Committee is reviewing a plan to widen Pleasant Street to three lanes between the Star Market entrance and Trapelo Road.

The plans, drawn up by McLean's traffic consultant, Rizzo Associates, also call for traffic signals to be installed at the intersection of Trapelo and Pleasant and the intersection of Pleasant and the new McLean site driveway. The new drive will wind down the hill opposite the market and carry all traffic going to and from the 488-unit senior living complex and the 150,000 square-foot research and development building.

Without the recommended improvements, said Rick Bryant, Vice President of Transportation Planning at Rizzo, traffic on Pleasant Street would barely move at all during the evening rush hour.

The existing roadbed on South Pleasant is 26 feet wide. The rebuilt road will be 41 feet wide, according to Erik Maki, Rizzo Senior Traffic

Engineer, with a new 11-foot turning lane and a one-meter shoulder on either side to accommodate bicycles.

Some Woods To Be Lost

To make room for the new pavement, a historic stone wall must be moved back about ten feet from its current location, and the hillside must be re-graded. This means that a swath of trees as much as 30 feet wide must be removed. It also means, to the dismay of landscape preservationists, that the former McLean gatehouse, known as the Pleasant Street Lodge, will be sandwiched by pavement, with the new turning lane on one side and the site driveway on the other.

Some new trees will be planted behind the relocated stone wall, but other sections of the hillside will remain as exposed ledge.

No changes are planned for the Trapelo roadbed, other than repainting the stripes.

At a public hearing on June 12, residents asked about other possible ways to enter and exit the



The new third lane will accommodate a queue of 12 cars waiting to turn left onto Trapelo Road and a queue of at least four cars right on to Trapelo will have to wait for a signal.

Between Star Market Drive and Trapelo Road

development. One suggested using the old McLean gate at Pleasant and Trapelo, but traffic engineers said that such a plan would require a four-way light, which would back up traffic in all directions unless extra lanes were added everywhere. Another resident asked whether some of the new traffic could be routed through the existing McLean entrance on Mill Street. The rezoning agreement forbids that, however. Only emergency vehicles will have access to the senior and R&D complexes from the Mill Street side.

Safety Is Primary Concern

Traffic Advisory Committee Chairman Mark Paolillo said that, when reviewing the plans, his committee's primary consideration was safety. Indeed, the intersection of Trapelo and Pleasant is currently one of the most dangerous in the town. There are numerous accidents, no safe pedestrian crossings, and long traffic delays, which encourage drivers to avoid the intersection entirely by cutting through the supermarket parking lot. The intersec-

tion is currently rated F on the level-of-service scale developed by the national Transportation Research Board. Rizzo engineers said they expect the proposed work to improve that efficiency rating to a C or D. Anything higher than that would encourage drivers to speed and discourage pedestrians from using the intersection, they said.

Rizzo figures that 740 pedestrians a day will pass through the intersection, making it imperative that safe crosswalks and sidewalks be provided.

The Traffic Advisory Committee has recommended that a sidewalk at the corner of Mill and Trapelo be extended all the way to Pleasant Street. Senior citizens who live in the apartment complex off Mill Street are often spotted walking in the roadway with their groceries.

Rizzo engineers said that improvements to the Pleasant/Trapelo intersection will reduce cut-through traffic in the supermarket lot by about 50 percent—a definite benefit to shoppers.

About 29 percent of the new McLean traffic is expected to come from Boston and Cambridge;

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waiting to turn left into the McLean site drive. Cars turning right into McLean will be permitted to turn on red. Cars turning

Pleasant Street, continued from page 9

another 27 percent will come from Route 128, 19 percent from Watertown and Newton, 10 percent from Medford and Arlington, 4 percent from Waltham, 3 percent from Lexington, and 8 percent from Belmont. These estimates are based on current commuter traffic in and out of the McLean campus.

520 More Cars per Hour

The new intersection at Pleasant and Trapelo is designed to handle approximately 520 more cars per hour during morning and evening rush, a 17 percent increase over the existing traffic volume at those times. About 280 of these will be commuters approaching the McLean property from the south. (This represents somewhat less than half of the overall traffic to the R&D and senior complexes.) The other 240 are expected to come from the new Mormon temple in Belmont, the Metropolitan State Hospital site in Waltham, and redeveloped commercial properties on South Pleasant Street.

At the June 12 hearing, Rizzo's Rick Bryant explained that the new signal at Trapelo Road would

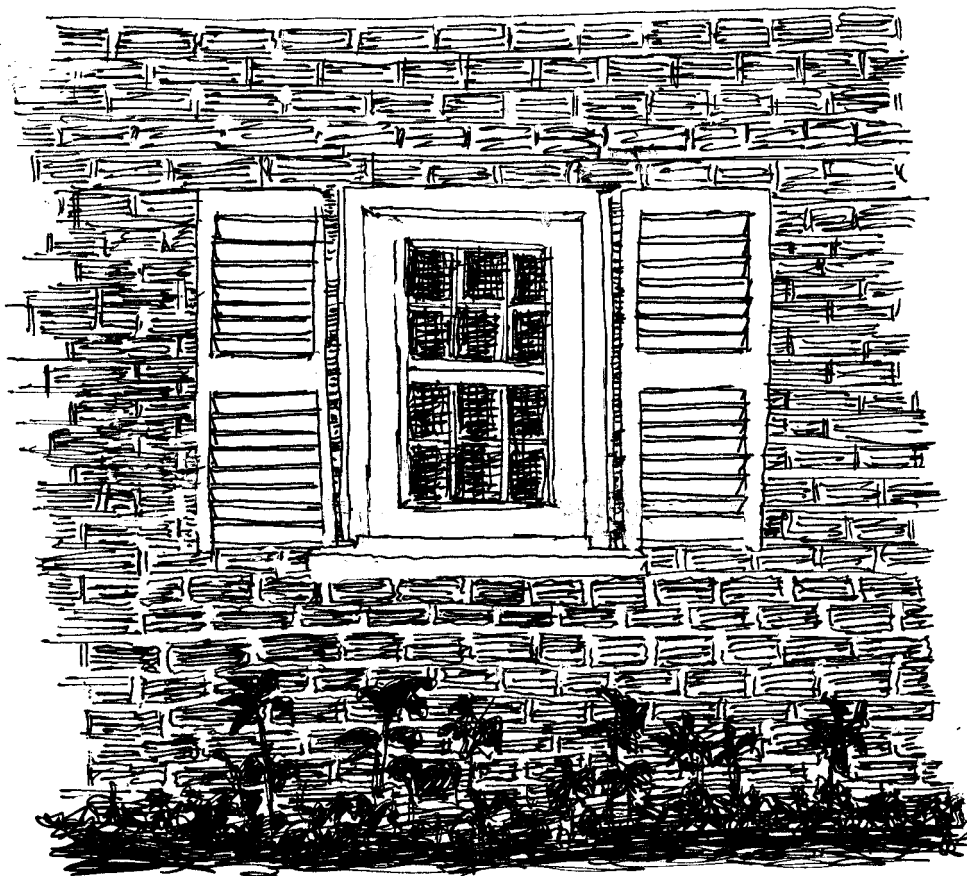
have five phases, two of which would be activated only when needed. Phase One would be for through traffic on Trapelo Road. Phase Two would be for eastbound traffic on Trapelo, cars turning left from Trapelo on to Pleasant, and cars turning right from Pleasant on to Trapelo. Phase Three, activated by push-button only, would allow pedestrians to safely cross Pleasant Street. Phase Four would allow only right and left turns from Pleasant Street while pedestrians cross Trapelo. Phase Five, activated by magnetic loop detectors, would stop traffic to allow nearby residents of Trapelo Road to back out of their driveways.

Traffic Signals Synchronized

In addition, traffic signals at all the surrounding intersections would be synchronized in order to keep traffic flowing smoothly. This includes signals at Waverley Oaks Road, Mill Street, Moraine Street, Lexington Street, Church Street, Thayer Road, and the pedestrian crossing in front of Andros Diner on Trapelo. These changes would make for longer queues in Waltham and on Mill Street, Bryant said, but this is "the only way the system can work."

Town officials have applied for a state grant of \$800,000 to pay for the recommended improvements to the Pleasant Street intersections. The new sidewalk on Trapelo, if approved, will be paid for by the town. At the McLean hearings held this spring by the Planning Board, some residents argued that improvements, including sidewalk improvements, will also be needed on Mill, Concord, and other surrounding streets. But the Planning Board has not yet required further work.

Sharon Vanderslice is a Town Meeting Member from Precinct 2.



McLean Brook: 200-Foot Setback Is Sought

By Lynne Polcari

Twenty Belmont residents have appealed the June 5 decision issued by the Belmont Conservation Commission, which found that a stream on the McLean Hospital property flows only intermittently. The residents, some of whom are abutters to McLean, assert that the stream called Junction Brook is perennial, meaning that it flows all year long, except in cases of severe drought. They have filed their appeal with the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection [DEP].

The designation is important because it affects McLean development plans, particularly those of American Retirement Corp. [ARC], which is planning to build a 600,000-square-foot senior community on 12.83 acres, beginning just 100 feet west of the brook. If the Department of Environmental Protection overrules the Conservation Commission finding and determines that Junction Brook is perennial, as defined by the Rivers Protection Act, developers will have to respect a buffer zone of 200 feet on each side. This could affect the size of proposed ARC buildings.

Patrick Garner, a professional wetlands scientist and hydrologist with a specialty in river analysis, who represents the appellants, filed their appeal on Friday, June 15. The citizens are requesting that the DEP issue a Superseding Determination finding Junction Brook a perennial stream with bordering vegetated wetlands.

The appeal takes issue with the Conservation Commission decision on several points. The citizens contend that evidence supports the claim that characteristics of Junction Brook are consistent with those of a perennial stream. Primary evidence that a stream is perennial is the presence of year-round flow into the brook. Garner found that the brook was predominantly fed by ground-water flow, as opposed to run-off from storms. He cites evidence

“of former wetlands and ground water source data that substantiate year-round flows into the brook.” The stream morphology, which is the channel the stream runs through, also supports the citizens’ contention that the stream is perennial, according to Garner.

Furthermore, although the Conservation Commission found no bordering vegetated wetlands [BVW] along Junction Brook, the appeal argues otherwise. Garner notes that “areas of BVW are found in one or more pockets along the brook up to a point within 75 feet of the headwaters of the brook itself.”

The Belmont Conservation Commission made the determination that the stream was intermittent after hearing testimony from Garner for the appellants as well as representatives from

McLean. Since the stream had been designated intermittent in a 1997 ruling, the burden of proof was on the applicant to prove that the stream was perennial. The Conservation Commission decided that the stream morphology, the lack of macroinvertebrates, and the size of the watershed supported the designation of Junction Brook as an intermittent stream.

Typically, the appeal process includes an on-site investigation, a review of the appellants’ position, and a consideration of material submitted by both sides of an issue. The DEP may take several months to make its decision.

The citizens who filed the appeal are Martha Jean Eakin, who brought the original request to the Conservation Commission; Kathleen and Robert Allen; Jeff Buster; Charles W. and Mary P. Chatfield; Mark D’Andrea; Arline and Leo Davis; Nora Devlin; Amber and Sharon Espar; James A. Graves; Scott M. Johnson; Kim Scola; Thomas G. Shapiro; Jennifer Smith; Roger S. Webb; Amy Wilson; and Joan A. Wissmann.

Lynne Polcari is a Pct. 5 Town Meeting Member.



High School circa 1898, continued from page 7

support of the schools, and bemoans the expense of complying with state regulations. The school budget for 1899 was \$19,000.

The high school remained on Moore Street until 1915, when increasing enrollment forced the town to

build an even larger school on Orchard Street. The Annex building, renamed the Homer School, was then used by elementary students until 1935, when these children were moved to the brand-new Winn Brook School. The interior of the building was subsequently renovated to house town offices, although the original high school stage on the third floor remains as it was over a hundred years ago.

—Sharon Vanderslice



Sources: Town of Belmont Annual Reports 1896-1900; Belmont Historical Society Newsletters dated December 1968, September 1979, and June 1983; *Belmont Bulletin* July 17, 1897 and September 18, 1897; *Belmont Citizen* January 22, 1921; *Homer and Allied Families* by Thomas H. Bateman, *Images of America: Belmont* by the Belmont Historical Society.

LABURNUM

Eleazer Homer, Architect, Grew Up in Belmont

E. B. Homer, the architect of the Town Hall Annex, was born to Orlando Mead Homer and Mary Frances Wellington Homer in 1864. At that time, his family owned the land on which the Annex now stands, the site of the famous Wellington Tavern, which was a favorite stagecoach stop on the Concord Turnpike (now Concord Avenue). His grandfather, J. Oliver Wellington, was one of the founding fathers of Belmont and the original chairman of the Board of Assessors.

Homer grew up in town and graduated from the two-room Belmont High on School Street. One of his teachers was Mary L. Burbank, for whom the Burbank School is named. Homer went on to attend the School of Architecture at MIT (then known as the School of Technology, Boston). While a student there in 1883, he lived with his widowed grandmother, Mrs. Oliver Wellington, on Pleasant Street. After his marriage, he moved to the Captain James Homer house at 613 Pleasant. His mother, a music teacher, was a long-time member of the Belmont School Committee. On his father's side, he was related to the artist Winslow Homer, who spent time on Pleasant Street as a boy and returned off and on to paint here during the 1860s and 1870s.

E. B. Homer received his B.S. in architecture in 1885 and subsequently worked for Hartwell and Richardson, the architects of Belmont's Queen Anne-style Town Hall. Between 1887 and 1901, he was a professor of architecture at MIT and designed the

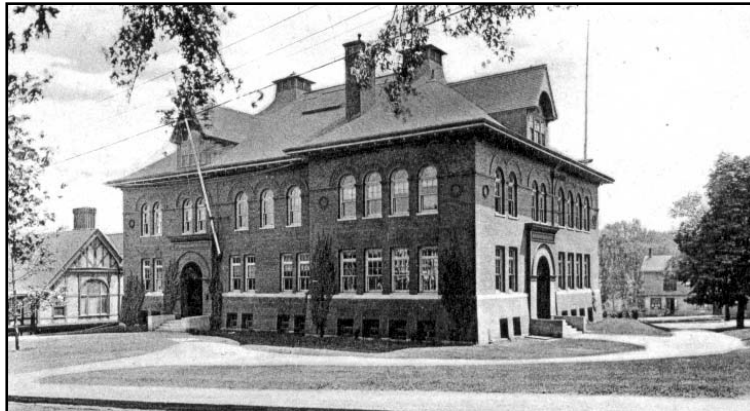
institute's new headquarters on Trinity Place in Boston. His design for the Belmont High School on Moore Street was selected above competing plans by unanimous vote of the building committee. It cost \$43,184 to build in 1898.

Homer subsequently designed the 1899 Tudor Block on Leonard Street, which was razed in 1968 to make way for the Belmont Savings Bank, and the 1900 Daniel Butler School on Sycamore Street.

In 1901, he left Belmont to become the first director of the prestigious Rhode Island School of Design in Providence. He served in France during the First World War and died in 1929 of complications from chronic bronchitis contracted during the war. In his obituary, *The Providence Journal* described him as "one of the best known architects in New England."

His young son, Arthur Bartlett Homer, born in Belmont in 1896, went on to become the CEO of Bethlehem Steel.

—Sharon Vanderslice



Two of Homer's Belmont buildings are the 1898 High School (now the Town Hall Annex), influenced by H. H. Richardson, and the 1899 Tudor-style "Olive Block" on Leonard Street.

Sources: *Homer and Allied Families* by Thomas H. Bateman; *Arlington and Belmont Directory* 1883; *Belmont Historical Society Newsletter*, December 1968 and June 1983; *Providence Journal* Obituary, February 14, 1929; *Town of Belmont Annual Report* 1898; *Biographical Dictionary of American Architects* by Henry and Elsie Withey; *Who's Who in Belmont, Volume 1* by Samuel Robbins; *Images of America: Belmont* by the Belmont Historical Society; *Belmont Bulletin* July 17, 1897, September 18, 1897; *Belmont Citizen* January 22, 1921; *From Pequotsette Plantation to the Town of Belmont, Massachusetts 1630-1953*, compiled by Frances B. Baldwin.

Building Projects, continued from page 16

apparently could fail at any time. Catch buckets have to be placed in the classrooms and hallways to collect water from a leaky roof. And because of an inadequate heating and ventilation system, children swelter in 80-degree classrooms in the dead of winter while their schoolmates across the hall shiver. What is most significant is that the windows on the Orchard Street side must be replaced, which means installing new structural supports for the entire wall. The cost of this repair alone could trigger an ADA requirement that the building be made accessible to the disabled.

According to a recent feasibility study, building a new school would be cheaper than fixing the old one. This spring, the Capital Budget Committee estimated that the town will have to contribute between \$9.4 and \$10.2 million (in 2002 dollars) of the cost.

Outdated Buildings Create Hazards

Chief William H. Osterhaus of the Belmont Fire Department has been asking for new fire stations for a very long time. The trucks are too big and heavy to fit into the old buildings, two of which were designed for horse-drawn wagons. The wiring and drainage systems need to be upgraded, and on Leonard Street “egress is hampered by heavy traffic,” according to a plan completed way back in 1963. New development in town will increase the number of calls the department must respond to, but there are no more bays for additional equipment. The department needs about 8,000 more square feet of space than it has now, according to Assistant Chief David Frizzell.

A town committee is currently working on a plan to consolidate and relocate the fire stations and sell off the old ones. Final estimates are yet to be determined, but in the interim, the Capital Budget Committee figures that we’ll have to spend at least \$5 million in 2004 to bring the Fire Department into the twenty-first century. Some of that may be financed through the sale of the existing stations.

Next in line is the Belmont Memorial Library, a victim of its own success. Located in one of the more well-read towns around, the library lent out close to half a million items last year, hosted story hours for over 2000 children, and answered a whop-

ping 45,000 questions at the reference desk. Despite frequent culling of the collection, there is no room in the stacks for all the books that the library owns. Many materials are stashed in back rooms; there are not nearly enough computers for all the people waiting to use them; and there is a serious lack of study space for those who need to do research on the premises. The main library, constructed in 1965, has roof problems, drainage problems, climate control problems, fire suppression problems, and—no surprise—problems with access for the disabled. After an extended feasibility study, the library trustees presented a plan for a new building to Town Meeting in April. It calls for 17,000 more square feet of space at a cost to the town of \$9 million. A simple renovation of the old building, at about \$5.2 million, would force the library to dispose of up to 50% of its collection in order to make the stacks accessible to those in wheelchairs. This project is tentatively on the taxpayers’ agenda for 2005 and is expected to cost the average homeowner about \$100 a year.

Other projects on the horizon, according to the Capital Improvement Plan, are the replacement of the Underwood Pool Bathhouse in 2004/2005 for an estimated \$500,000 and renovation of the high school library in 2007 for \$3 million. A long-term road repair program and further improvements to the athletic complex are also contemplated.

Still remaining is the question of what to do with the site of the old Kendall School, which was destroyed by fire in 1999. Belmont senior citizens, who have been waiting over twenty years for a permanent senior center, would like the insurance settlement used to build a new community center there. Supporters of the Kendall Center for the Arts, which was rendered homeless by the fire, would like the arts programs to be reinstated too. How much is possible? And how will we pay for it all?

Bond Issue Proposed

The Board of Selectmen, the Warrant Committee, and the Capital Budget Committee plan to hold a summit meeting in September to establish a definite timeline for these projects based on their perceived urgency, their advocates’ degree of readiness to proceed, and the willingness of the public to finance them.

Jim Staton, chairman of the Capital Budget

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Committee, believes that rather than asking the voters to pass a different debt exclusion every year, the town should have a single bond issue to finance a set of projects over a seven-to-ten-year period. This would allow the town treasurer to borrow the funds needed at the time of construction, and avoid the perpetual uncertainty that precedes debt-exclusion votes.

Master Plan Needed

With so many projects converging, it seems that now, more than ever, the Town of Belmont needs a master plan. Accustomed to dealing with crises on a case-by-case basis, the Warrant Committee must perform a kind of triage each year to decide which emergencies are the worst. Meanwhile, more systemic ailments have gone untreated. A comprehensive, long-term plan for the whole town could avoid duplication of effort as well as costs and ensure that the demands of one constituency don't supersede the overall good of the town.

For example, the library trustees want to rebuild on Concord Avenue. But the larger question is: how do we want to use that corridor for town and school business in the future?

Should we allow developers to gobble up what remains of Belmont's open space, while existing

commercial properties on South Pleasant Street and portions of Trapelo Road lie fallow? Municipalities in different parts of the country are offering tax and other incentives to developers willing to rebuild in urban areas. Couldn't we go out and *find* the businesses we want in town instead of waiting for the wrong ones to come and find *us*?

If we are eager to expand the commercial tax base, then why aren't we investing in our town business centers? An intelligent redesign of Belmont Center (with parking improvements) drawn up by the Traffic Advisory Committee two years ago is still on the drawing table.

Could some of our complaints about traffic and lack of parking be solved by a crosstown shuttle and extensive sidewalk and crosswalk improvements that would encourage more people to walk instead of drive?

And what about our historically significant buildings? Putting preservation restrictions on the ones that remain would help these magnificent structures withstand the pressures of expedience.

Living in a community like Belmont costs money, for sure. But I suspect few would be unwilling to pay if they knew that their dollars would be well spent.

--Sharon Vanderslice, with contributions from Lynne Polcari

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People Are Asking

What Should Belmont Build Next?

This past May, Belmont voters approved a debt exclusion of \$2.2 million to build a new track and field at the high school. There's no question that the funds were sorely needed. High school athletes have been running on a cracked and dangerous asphalt track for years, and in a town with a shortage of athletic fields, the high-maintenance football field could be used only four or five times a year.

A new, multi-sport, synthetic turf field and a lighted polyurethane track are due to be finished this fall. The project is estimated to cost the average homeowner \$39 a year for the next ten years.

But there is more to come.

As a result of deferred maintenance, new federal regulations, increased development pressure, and a fire, Belmont faces a series of capital projects over the next seven years that will raise taxes more than some people will like.

The most urgent of these is to make the town's administrative offices accessible to the disabled. (See article on page 1.) This requires ground level-entrances, extra-wide elevators, reconfigured rest-rooms, and other expensive improvements. In order to comply with a federal court order, voters will have to approve some or all of the funding for this \$9.5 to \$11 million project in fiscal year 2002.

Next up, according to a preliminary plan distributed by the Capital Budget Committee this spring, will probably be the razing and rebuilding of the Wellington School.

Like good sports, Wellington teachers and students have been making do while every other school in town has been renovated or rebuilt. The largest of the town's elementary schools, it is actually a combination of three different buildings jerry-rigged together to serve its 450 students: the 1938 gym and cafeteria, the 1963 academic area, and the 1971 Orchard Street entrance and library. This architectural smorgasbord has created a systems nightmare. The aging electrical, plumbing, and heating systems

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