

Belmont Citizens Forum

Vol. 2, No. 2

A Newsletter for Belmont Residents

March 2001

Citizens Say It's Time to Build Senior Center

By Lynne Cook Polcari

For years, Belmont residents have debated the merits of having a permanent senior center in town, a place where older citizens could exercise, socialize, play bridge, work on arts- and-crafts projects, attend health screenings, and perhaps take part in a daily meal program. There are 292 communities in Massachusetts that already have senior centers, and according to the state's Executive Office of Elder Affairs, they are well used.

The potential constituency for such a center in Belmont is large. Twenty percent of the town's residents, about 5,300 people, are considered senior citizens. For those who no longer have jobs or children to occupy their time, a central gathering place can be an antidote to loneliness.

In a recent letter to the Board of Selectmen, nine senior citizens wrote: "The topic of a senior center for Belmont is not new; in fact, many seniors have worked for and advocated its creation for nearly two decades... We have waited in the wings and have supported capital appropriations which benefited the town and other demographic groups... We deserve a chance to achieve our goal while we are still active enough to utilize the center's benefits and programs."

Summary: Senior citizens, who make up 20% of the town's population, have waited years for a permanent senior center. With the vacant Kendall site on Beech Street, and the insurance money that comes with it, the town may finally have the wherewithal to do something about it.

Appropriating space and money for such a center, however, remains a problem. Seniors presently have a temporary center in the parish hall of Our Lady of Mercy church on Oakley Road, where the town leases space. But seniors who frequent it say the building is not suitable for long-term use. Its trussed roof, for example, makes it difficult to heat and cool and creates acoustical problems for those who are hard of hearing. The building, located on a slope, barely meets the requirements for handicapped accessibility. And the neighbors complain about cars parked all day on surrounding streets.

Seniors have reminded town officials that this location was intended to be temporary. In addition to having no elevator (which forces those who use walkers or wheelchairs to go outside the building and re-enter on another floor from the street), the building lacks a reception area, a proper-sized kitchen, an equipped exercise room, sufficient game room and small-group meeting space, even a sink in the arts-and-crafts room. *Continued on page 8*

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WANTED: Web designer

The Citizens Forum needs a volunteer or two to perform several important internet-related jobs:

- 1. to design and maintain a web site that archives our newsletters in an easy-to-read, easy-to-download format,*
- 2. to set up e-mail addresses connected with the site so that people can easily communicate with our officers and committees,*
- 3. to maintain a list of supporters and periodically send out notices of important meetings via e-mail.*

Please help us join the 21st century. Call Sue Bass at 489-4729, or write her at MerrFilms@aol.com. Thanks.

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Environmental Events Calendar

Organic Lawn Care for the Home Gardener.

Free lecture by Lindsay Strode, a specialist in native and naturalized landscaping, organic lawn and plant care, and bio-engineered erosion control. Learn how to care for your lawn without pesticides and chemical fertilizer. **Thursday, March 22, 7:30 p.m.** at the First Parish in Watertown, Unitarian-Universalist Church, 35 Church Street. Co-sponsored by Watertown Citizens for Environmental Safety. (617) 924-5723.

“Year of the Charles” Lecture Series.

Environmentalist Bill McKibben, author of *The End of Nature*, will speak on **April 4 at 7:30 p.m.** at the Watertown Free Public Library, 124 Main Street, Watertown. Free. For further information about the series, call (617) 972-6436.

Earth Day Clean-up. Help the Belmont Citizens Forum clean up litter from undeveloped land in Belmont. You can spend an hour or all day. Bring gloves and wear long sleeves and long pants. Children welcome. **Saturday, April 21.** The raindate is April 28. To sign up, call (617) 484-1844.

Mystic River Herring Run 10K Road Race.

Celebrate one of the largest fish runs in the state and cheer runners along the banks of the Mystic. Learn about the river's history and its role as habitat for wildlife. Enjoy music, fish puppets, and other entertainment. **Saturday, May 19.** Rain or shine. The race starts at 10:00 a.m. in Somerville, follows the river, and ends at the Medford Boat Club on the dam between the Mystic Lakes, Mystic Valley Parkway, Medford. For race information, call (617) 628-8850 x3. The celebration begins at 11:00 a.m. at the Medford Boat Club. For information, call (781) 316-3438. Sponsored by: Alewife/Mystic River Advocates and Mystic River Watershed Association.

Correction: Last fall, we incorrectly listed Judy Record's birthdate as December 9, 1944. She actually was born on December 8.

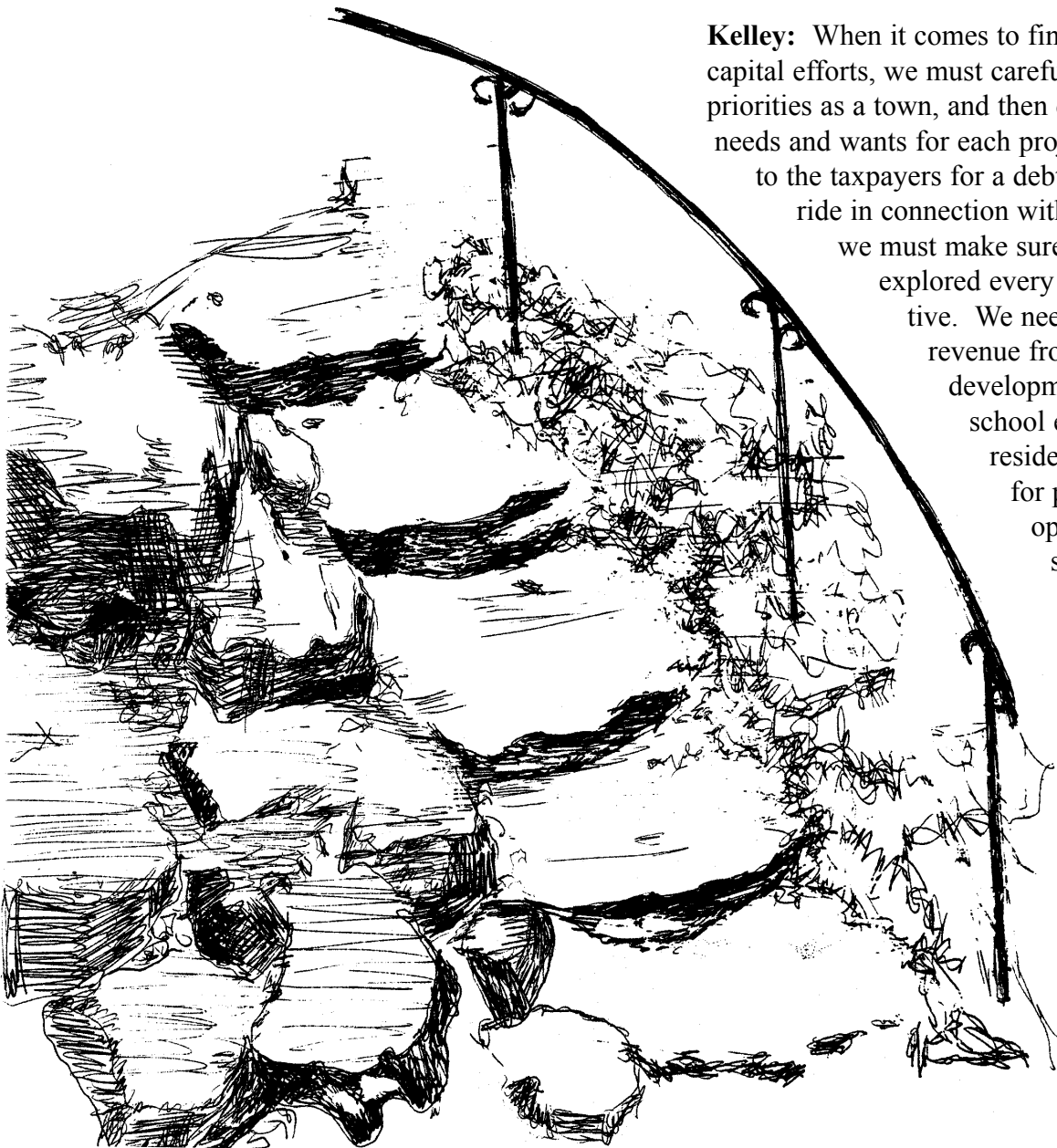
Candidates for Selectman Answer 10 Questions

Every year, Belmont voters elect one member of the three-person Board of Selectmen to a three-year term. This April 2, they will choose between the incumbent, Will Brownsberger, and the challenger, Nancy Kelley. The Belmont Citizens Forum asked the two candidates to respond to the following questions on planning and zoning issues. Each candidate was limited to a total of one thousand words.

1. What do you believe is the best way for the town to raise money for future infrastructure repairs/improvements and for other major capital investments?

Brownsberger: The time is now for us to make decisions about investment in our future – excellent education, safe streets, vital business areas, care for seniors, open space preserved. I have been working hard for the past three years to build consensus among leaders about our financial condition and long term needs. Town leaders from across the political spectrum have recently said that the time is near to ask citizens to support needed investments. I trust the voters and support asking them to make choices at referenda on investment proposals. I advocate a circuit breaker to limit the impact of possible tax increases on seniors.

Kelley: When it comes to financing infrastructure/capital efforts, we must carefully define our overall priorities as a town, and then distinguish between needs and wants for each project. If we have to go to the taxpayers for a debt exclusion or tax override in connection with these expenditures, we must make sure that we have explored every other possible alternative. We need to look at generating revenue from limited commercial development. Town and school employees, as well as residents, have great ideas for possible revenue opportunities. We should hire a town grant-writer to become expert at identifying funding opportunities and successfully applying for money. We should explore the benefit of making commercial sponsorship opportunities available for projects, like our high school track.



Continued

Nancy Kelley and Will Brownsberger Address

2. Do you support passage of the Community Preservation Act for Belmont as a means to fund open space preservation, historic preservation, and affordable housing? Why or why not? Would you lead a campaign to secure the necessary approval of this Act by the Town Meeting and a majority of the Town's voters?

Kelley: The Community Preservation Act would allow Belmont to obtain additional resources to protect open space, provide more affordable housing and preserve historically significant sites in Town. It would also raise residential taxes by up to \$150 on the average house in Belmont. Given that Belmont residents need to consider operating overrides and/or debt exclusion this year, we will need to weigh the overall impact on taxes before pursuing this option. What I do like about the CPA, however, is that it can help Belmont purchase two-family residences scattered throughout town to help us provide more affordable housing to our Town employees. It has been shown that there is greater benefit to placing small units of affordable housing throughout Town versus concentrating it in one part of town.

Brownsberger: I believe the Community Preservation Act is an important tool and I actively supported its passage statewide. Unfortunately, it is not immediately useful to Belmont. We are currently facing urgent town needs which all require increased tax support. Education, traffic control, and the roads come first, and CPA funds cannot be used for these purposes. The CPA may have a role in a later year for Belmont.

3. The Alewife Study Committee has discussed several possible uses of the undeveloped property known as the Belmont Uplands. What do you think is the best use of this land?

Brownsberger: Preservation of all of the Alewife land would be desirable, but I do not believe that it is fiscally possible at this time. We should explore compromise approaches that involve smaller development, less traffic, protection of more of the

upland woods. However, we should never compromise protection of the wetlands or risk creation of drainage problems in Belmont.

Kelley: Limited commercial development of the Alewife Uplands area represents the best solution for this property and for the town. This approach can help us to generate additional tax revenue for operating budget requirements and capital projects, while minimizing the impact on residential property tax. We can also preserve open space and solve some of the drainage problems with the site and direct much of the related traffic out to Route 2, instead of into the town. This approach would also prevent increased burden on our schools that would result from residential development or Chapter 40B housing.

4. Are you in favor of a bicycle trail through Belmont? Why or why not? If you support this concept, are you willing to fight for such a bike trail?

Kelley: As an avid roller-blader who frequently blades along the Minuteman Bike Trail, I'd love the idea of a bike path here in Belmont. In fact, as part of the original McLean agreement, we obtained land that might support a bike path in Belmont. However, some proposals, like locating a bike path next to the train tracks or in close proximity to individual residences, have definite drawbacks. Any proposal must be evaluated on its impact on conservation land, impact on residential privacy, and safety for the riders, as well as cost to Belmont.

Brownsberger: I do favor a bicycle trail through Belmont as a priority. I worked for it in my first term, but we were defeated by the state's unwillingness to release land for the Wayside trail. With or without state help, I believe that we should devote more of Concord Avenue to creation of a truly safe bike trail. I strongly support more safe bicycle routes.

Town of Belmont Planning and Zoning Issues

5. In the focus groups conducted by the Vision 21 Committee, many residents said that traffic was a major problem in town. What specific suggestions do you have for reducing, managing, or redirecting traffic flow through town?

Brownsberger: First, we need to make our major streets safer for both pedestrians and drivers. The streets should be narrower and better curbed and should have “bumpout” pedestrian crossing areas. After years of effort by me and others, Pleasant Street is close to starting construction along these lines. Trapelo Road is the highest priority after Pleasant Street.

Second, in our town centers we need to place a special focus on pedestrian crossing options, sidewalk width and parking availability.

Third, we need to work with residential neighborhoods to reduce cut-through traffic and control parking. I started an effort to address local problems in the area behind Waverley Square. After a meeting with Precinct 4 Town Meeting Members, the police have studied the area and made dozens of findings and recommendations. We will hold a hearing on these recommendations for the neighborhood shortly.

I would like to conduct similar efforts in other neighborhoods across Belmont over the next few years. In some neighborhoods, I would like to go as far as exploring street cut-offs to prevent cut-through traffic. This could make more neighborhoods friendly for families, in the same way that Claflin Street and Kendall Gardens are friendly.

Too often in the past, we have made isolated changes on particular streets or corners with unforeseen consequences. My goal is to get more comprehensive planning done for whole precincts or neighborhoods. This seems like the right level at which to plan for many traffic issues.

In general, I want to calm traffic without choking it. Many Belmont citizens are dependent on vehicles.

Kelley: One of our biggest challenges is traffic control and mitigation. While conducting the McLean negotiations, both McLean Hospital and the Town

conducted detailed examinations of the traffic at every intersection in Belmont and the impact on those intersections from the McLean development and future regional growth. Determinations were made as to the level of service at each intersection and what mitigation steps might be feasible. We should carefully re-review those reports and re-consider the findings and recommendations as part of the Town's road reconstruction and traffic control efforts.

6. How much more commercial development in Belmont (in thousands of square feet or another quantitative metric) would you favor and how much additional revenue, net of the cost of town services for this development, would you expect to raise? Where would these developments be located? What types of businesses do you want to see in town?

Kelley: There are limited opportunities for limited commercial development within Belmont: the Uplands, South Pleasant Street, and the abandoned VW dealership on Trapelo Road. We should consider moderate-cost senior housing on Trapelo, with linkage to develop traffic-calming measures like an esplanade on that road. Doing so would make Trapelo Road more pedestrian friendly and help invigorate the Waverley and Cushing Square businesses. We need to look at small shops and restaurants for commercial development in our business centers, aiding those businesses with streamlined permitting, and business front and signage assistance funds.

Brownsberger: There are no additional open spaces in Belmont that I would allocate to commercial development. We may absorb some development under the McLean compromise and possibly on the Alewife property. But I do not foresee any other development of open space in Belmont.

I think the opportunities for development are in our existing town business areas. We have seen positive movement in both Waverley and Cushing

Continued on next page

Candidates Q & A

Continued from previous page

squares as several major buildings have been renovated. These are modest opportunities without large fiscal impact, but they will improve our quality of life.

7. The draft principles issued by Belmont's Vision 21 Committee call for maintaining "an open inclusive decision-making process" in town government. How can this best be accomplished?

Brownsberger: "Open inclusive decision-making" means working very hard to draw people into government decisions. I am proud of the Vision 21 process for this very reason. The diverse group that ran the Vision 21 process has done a great job and has included thousands of people. We need to sustain the Vision 21 process and I will work to ensure its continuity so that its recommendations lead to action.

The most important factor in "open inclusive decision-making" is leadership. I have worked very hard to identify interested parties for every decision we make, to contact them and to encourage them to participate. Only Selectmen who continuously make diligent efforts at outreach can create truly "open inclusive decision-making."

Kelley: As part of my campaign, I have pledged to better inform citizens as to what is happening in our Town government. We should consider annual "State of the Town" presentations on cable access with quarterly newsletters sent to all residents updating them on the work of our town government and associated committees and task forces. As we did during the McLean process, we should have periodic precinct meetings to help keep residents informed and involved and to encourage bi-directional communication. We need to make better use of the Citizen-Herald and Citizens Forum to ensure active, accurate, and upbeat communications and public relations. And we should continue one of the best results of the Vision 21 process, periodic surveying of community attitudes and concerns.

8. What cuts do you think could be made in the town budget without seriously reducing the quality of service to town residents? Would you consider privatizing certain town departments? If so, which ones?

Kelley: I am not now thinking in terms of what budget items should be cut, but Belmont must closely examine how we can make more efficient and effective use of our resources. I have already spoken out in favor of merging town and school maintenance departments. I think we need to consider cooperative agreements with surrounding communities for activities like snow removal, trash removal and recycling. For those activities, and any that might be considered for privatization, we would absolutely need to conduct cost-benefit analyses to help us make the right decisions.

Brownsberger: I think we can achieve very modest savings by consolidation of bill-processing operations across water, light, and treasury, and I am working to bring these departments together. Partial privatization of bill processing has already helped in these areas.

Comparative data suggest that we are a bit large at 53 police officers. On the other hand, police are in constant demand to respond to traffic and parking problems all over town.

Most of our departments are very lean – below the levels needed to respond well to the citizens' needs. I do not believe there are large savings opportunities in the town government at this time.

One privatization option that I do not favor at this time is sell-off of the Light Department. This would give us one-time gains but would probably cost citizens more over the long run.

9. Do you favor preserving the current fire stations as historic buildings when they are no longer in use as fire stations? Are there any other buildings in town that you think are worthy of preservation as the town grows and changes?

Brownsberger: I do not have a position on preserving the fire stations as historic buildings. We

are in the process of determining what the new fire station configuration should be. There are many other attractive historic buildings worth preserving in town, among them, the town hall and the school administration building.

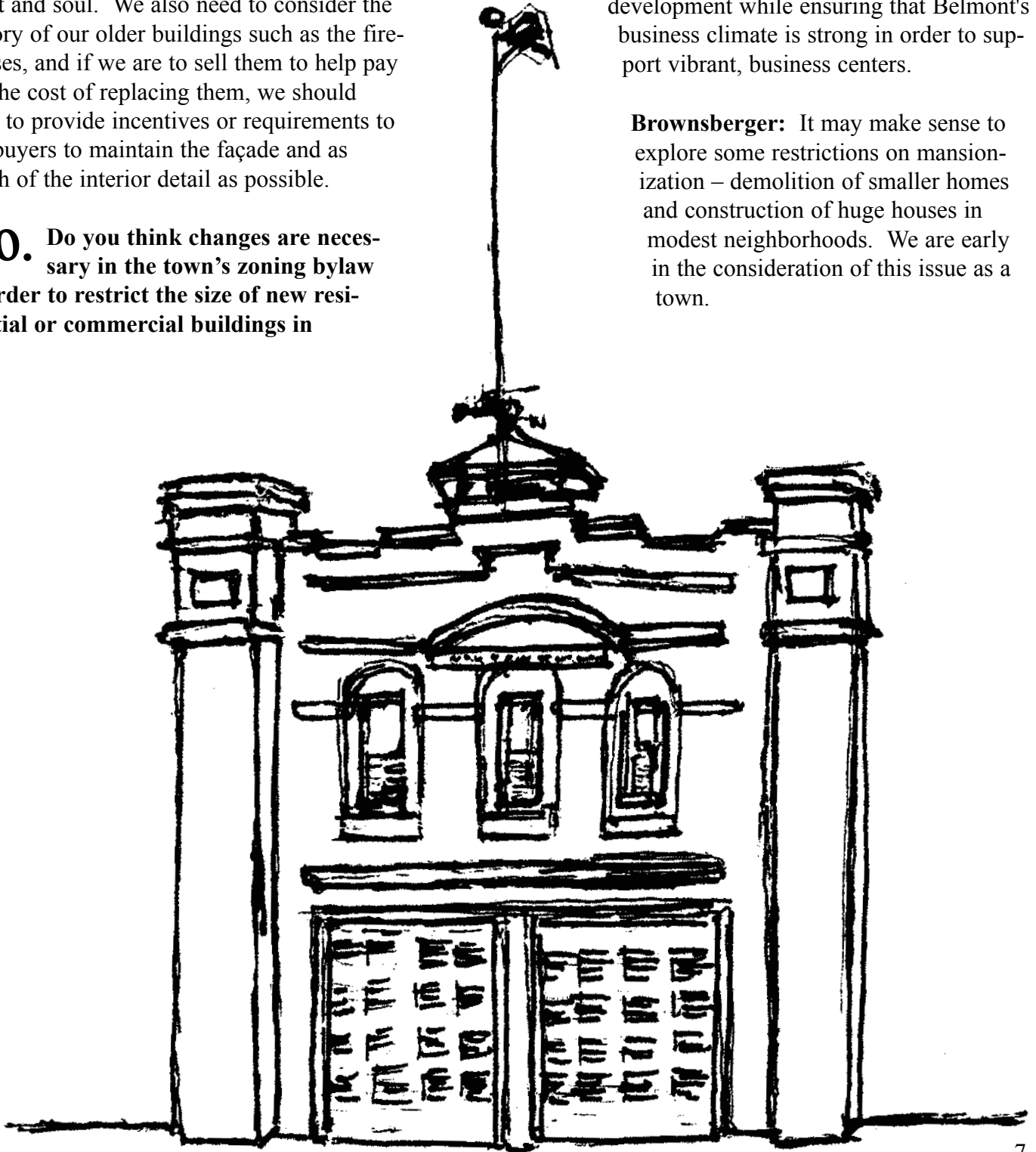
Kelley: In building a new future for a community, great attention and respect must be paid to its history. I love the town government complex in Belmont Center, and consider that our heart and soul. We also need to consider the history of our older buildings such as the firehouses, and if we are to sell them to help pay for the cost of replacing them, we should look to provide incentives or requirements to the buyers to maintain the façade and as much of the interior detail as possible.

10. Do you think changes are necessary in the town's zoning bylaw in order to restrict the size of new residential or commercial buildings in

town? If so, what do you feel needs changing?

Kelley: I think we need to do a detailed review of our commercial and residential zoning bylaws, as well as our tax assessment process. The beauty of Belmont is our quiet, residential character, and any changes that we contemplate must be "in context" with that character. We need to ensure that our bylaws provide adequate protection against unwanted, intrusive, or inappropriate development while ensuring that Belmont's business climate is strong in order to support vibrant, business centers.

Brownsberger: It may make sense to explore some restrictions on mansionization – demolition of smaller homes and construction of huge houses in modest neighborhoods. We are early in the consideration of this issue as a town.



Kendall Site on Beech Street Would Be Perfect Spot

Continued from page 1

The town has first right of offer if Our Lady of Mercy's hall is ever put up for sale. But buying and renovating the building would be an expensive proposition, and some argue that it would still not meet all the expressed needs. Aside from the physical issues, there would be a parking problem unless we can purchase the parking lot from the church. Many believe that the proper course of action is to build a new center, designed specifically to meet senior needs.

Recently, the Council on Aging held a meeting to discuss the current status of the senior center. The featured speaker, Emmett Schmarzow, from the state's Executive Office of Elder Affairs, noted that those communities in Massachusetts that have created modern senior centers—with room for expansion—have seen a dramatic increase in usage.

Nava Niv-Vogel, Director of Belmont's Council on Aging, expects this would be true of Belmont, too. Daily attendance was up 30 percent last year at the temporary center.

With the addition of more programs and classes, total visits increased by seven thousand in 2000.

A new center, she says, would enable the council to accommodate programs it currently cannot provide and to offer a wider range of services to those elderly most at risk. For example, the council would like to move the daily meal program from Belmont Manor to the senior center. This would allow our most fragile elderly, who do not drive, to enjoy the benefits of the programs and a meal by making only one trip.

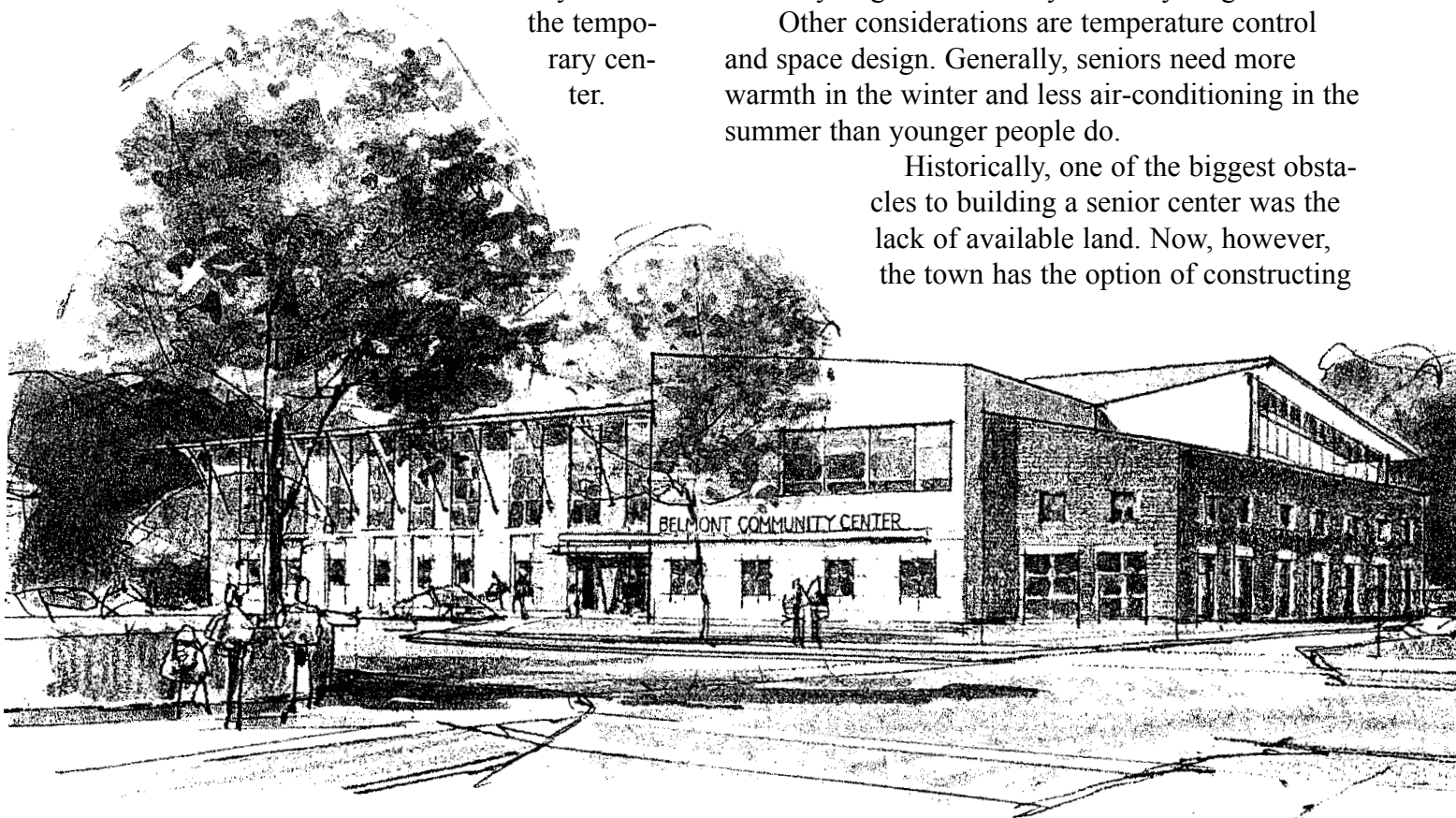
Schmarzow noted that of the 292 senior centers in Massachusetts, only six serve a mixed population. The primary reason for this is site control.

Ultimately, the seniors' primary concern is their ability to use the building how and when they desire.

Many seniors do not care to share a location with children. For them, the center is a place to enjoy the company of people their own age. Children on the site would raise noise and safety issues, particularly in the parking lot, where seniors fear they might accidentally harm a young child.

Other considerations are temperature control and space design. Generally, seniors need more warmth in the winter and less air-conditioning in the summer than younger people do.

Historically, one of the biggest obstacles to building a senior center was the lack of available land. Now, however, the town has the option of constructing



Rendering by Bargmann Hendrie + Archetype, Inc., Boston for the Kendall School Site Replacement Study, October 23, 2000.

Not For Senior Center, Say Neighbors and Advocates

something on the site of the former Kendall School on Beech Street. Built in 1914, this building was used as an elementary school until 1981, when it was closed due to declining enrollment. It was subsequently leased to a group of artists who established the popular Kendall Center for the Arts. This vibrant community arts center functioned as a place for residents of all ages to take art classes and also provided studio space for some of our local talent—a place to work as well as to exhibit their art.

Sadly, the center was destroyed by fire in 1999, and the site is currently an eyesore, an ugly reminder of that painful day when many local artists lost their life's work.

According to Lynne Doblin, a resident of the area and a Town Meeting Member, many neighbors support the concept of a combined senior and community center on the site and have circulated a petition to that effect. A well-designed center, they feel, would boost property values and might help fill some of the vacant storefronts on nearby Trapelo Road.

Belmont is now negotiating an insurance settlement on the property. How much money we will ultimately receive is unknown.

The insurance policy allows the town two options. Belmont is entitled to reimbursement for the costs of rebuilding a new building of “like kind and quality,” such as a new school, community center, or municipal office building. If we choose not to rebuild, we are entitled to the market value of the building when it was destroyed, about \$2 million.

A Special Town Meeting held in December allotted money for the initial design phase of a potential senior/community center on the Kendall site. Estimated costs were roughly \$9.6 million to build a center of the same size as the Kendall

School. The town hopes, through negotiations, to bridge the gap between the \$2 million offered as market value and the \$9.6 million estimate. Problems arise with the definition of “like kind and quality.” Replacing a very old building creates room for disputes. For example, the insurers do not want to pay for air conditioning because the old building did not have it. However, we will be using modern and less expensive construction methods and want to get credit for that. Town leaders are optimistic that they can narrow the spread to a settlement that is satisfactory.

In the meantime, the town must make decisions about which populations are to be served if we rebuild.

Although seniors want a senior center, Selectman Bill Monahan feels that the town has very pressing needs and must prioritize. Last month, he questioned whether, if we do not get full insurance reimbursement; it made sense to build a center that would serve the needs of only a small group. Town Meeting will have to decide, he said.

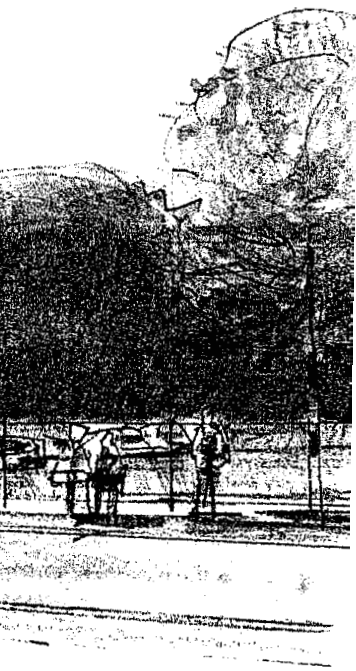
Selectman Will Brownsberger favors building a community center that would primarily serve the needs of seniors and have space included for other compatible uses.

The feasibility study gave a general idea of what might be built on the site, noted Selectman Anne Marie Mahoney. However, a final decision must be made based on the eventual insurance settlement. When the town does a final prioritization of all building needs in the fall, a Kendall Center project will be evaluated within this framework.

Clearly there are problems with the present senior-center location. The questions are whether these problems warrant the building of a senior center on the Kendall School site and whether the building should be solely for the use of seniors.

It seems that budget shortfalls will always be with us, due to Proposition 2½. But a lump sum of money and an opportunity to use scarce vacant land to create a building for the benefit of the community is rare. We should not squander this chance.

Lynne Polcari is a Town Meeting Member who lives in Precinct 5.





McLean Hearings Highlight Unresolved Issues

By Jim Graves

There have now been five public hearings of the Belmont Planning Board to review the site plans filed by the three developers of the McLean property. The Selectmen's Meeting Room at Town Hall has usually been filled to capacity, often with the audience overflowing into the hallway. The first half of almost every meeting has been devoted to a presentation by one of the developers; the second half, to comments or questions from concerned citizens. Two more hearings have been scheduled:

March 27 and April 3, both Tuesdays. They will be in the Selectmen's Meeting Room at 7:00 p.m.

The Belmont Citizens Forum, the McLean Open Space Alliance, and individual citizens have delivered oral and written comments on a wide range of significant issues. Some town committees — including the Historic District Commission, the McLean Implementation Committee, and the Traffic Advisory Committee — have also participated. It is now up to the Planning Board to decide which of the issues will be addressed through formal, legal conditions attached to approvals of the site plans.

Like other groups, the Belmont Citizens Forum is proposing conditions for the Planning Board to consider. The forum has asked the Planning Board to publish its draft summary of the conditions to give the public a chance to comment before the board's position becomes final.

Here is a brief summary of some of the major issues:

Alternative transportation. The developers of the site are not legally bound to any specific traffic mitigation measures, such as car-pooling or shuttle-bus service to Waverley Square and Alewife station. Yet the developers of the senior community and the R&D complex readily admit that it will be difficult for them to comply with the peak-hour traffic limits defined in the Traffic Monitoring and Mitigation Agreement. For example, ARC, the developer of the senior complex, expects to have 500 or more residents and 200 employees (100 on the main day-time shift alone). Yet it must comply with a thirty-trip limit during the morning rush hour. Belmont Technology Park, the R&D facility, plans to build 525 parking spaces to accommodate 500 employees, yet it is limited to 206 trips during peak morning rush hours. Unless these developers make a binding commitment to alternative transportation, the town would face a long-term conflict over compliance with the Traffic Monitoring and Mitigation Agreement.

Stormwater. Attendees at the hearings were concerned about stormwater and pollution runoff into the open space from the large paved parking areas. Also, the retirement community plans to build a storm-retention facility beyond its property line on the conservation land, in apparent violation of the conservation restriction. Furthermore, it appears likely that the remaining trees downhill from the ARC development will be cut off from natural water flows and could die as a result.

Projected traffic volume. Detailed design plans for the two intersections closest to the site (Pleasant Street and Trapelo Road, and Pleasant at the new McLean site drive) have not yet been revealed to the public; they have been promised soon. But it seems questionable whether these intersections will be able to handle the increased volume from McLean.

McLean's last traffic forecast for this area was conducted in 1998 and assumed a growth of only 1 percent in background traffic. Yet the Metro-West quadrant has experienced a 13 percent growth in office construction since then. Major new developments have been completed or are proposed in every direction from this site, including Belmont (the O'Neill site near Route 2), Waltham (along Waverley Oaks Road and on the old Met State property), Watertown (the Arsenal office complex), Arlington (the Mugar parcel), and Cambridge (Alewife).

Pedestrian safety. Consultants have recommended the use of concurrent signaling rather than exclusive signaling at the intersection of Trapelo Road and Pleasant Street. This means that pedestrians, including senior citizens from the new complex and from the town's nearby Waverley Oaks development, will have to try crossing at the same time that cars are making left or right turns through the crosswalks. The developers' traffic experts say that if exclusive signaling is used to stop all vehicles so that pedestrians can cross safely, traffic will back up. The town needs to decide if the priority is good traffic flow or pedestrian safety.

Steep driveway. The main site drive from Pleasant Street is steep, with sharp curves. Yet it will be the road used by senior citizens, many emergency vehicles, and trucks carrying hazardous materials and hazardous waste. Accidents seem likely.

Downed trees. The senior community and its adjoining site driveway will take up so much of Zone 3 that an estimated 90 percent of the trees in this area will be cut down. The developer has made much of the dozens of specimen trees that will be saved, but there has been no formal count of the thousands of mature trees that will be lost. Large retaining walls will interrupt the current vista of trees from the Waverley section of town.

Exterior lighting. The developer of the R&D property has presented an external lighting plan that will be visible in the open space, disturbing wildlife and evening strollers. The current plan fails to take advantage of new designs that can significantly limit

Continued on page 15

\$5 million as a possibility. But the land's not going to be free, and unless Belmont puts up some money, there seems no prospect of preventing development on that land. The legislature might put money in the MDC budget to expand its adjoining Alewife Reservation, but only if Belmont shows an interest in preserving the land by raising some money.

There was a chance of that last year, after the legislature passed the Community Preservation Act. The act permits a town to vote a property tax surcharge of 1, 2, or 3 percent to create a fund for open space conservation, protection of historic resources, and affordable housing. Each town's money will be partly matched by the state. Since the first \$100,000 of a property's assessed value may be excluded from the surcharge, and a town can exempt low-income residents and some senior citizens with moderate incomes, these surcharges need not be burdensome. The maximum 3 percent surcharge would add \$150 a year to the average Belmont property tax bill while raising \$1.1 million a year. With state matches and a chance of additional state aid, even a 1 percent surcharge might have enabled Belmont to make an offer on the Belmont uplands.

That chance passed in February, at least for a year. The last opportunity to put the Community Preservation Act on the April 2, 2001, town ballot was either a Town Meeting vote by February 26 or a citizens' petition by February 19. Since neither took place, the next chance is to get it on the April 2002 ballot.

Last month's deadlines did not pass without notice. Shortly beforehand, the selectmen discussed how easy it would be to collect signatures to put the Community Preservation Act on the ballot, but they did not do so. Conservation activists who might have mounted such an effort concluded regretfully that the surcharge would not pass without support from the selectmen.

O'Neill Properties Presents New Proposal

Meanwhile, O'Neill Properties has not been idle. Last year the firm repeatedly pressed the Alewife Study Committee with its plans for a 300,000-square-foot office building and a seven-story parking garage west of Acorn Park Drive.

Rebuffed by the committee, O'Neill filed with the state for a review under the Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act. It subsequently withdrew that proposal, but was back at a Planning Board meeting on March 8 with a new proposal, similar but 17 percent smaller.

Is an office building on that site, presumably one scaled back considerably more, the worst thing Belmont could allow for that land? On the face of it, it doesn't seem such a terrible idea. The area where O'Neill proposes to build is comparatively high ground, a low hillock rather than obvious swampland. The project would provide Belmont with additional property taxes without large demands for additional services. O'Neill can fix the stormwater problems somehow. And the traffic would all be on Route 2, wouldn't it?

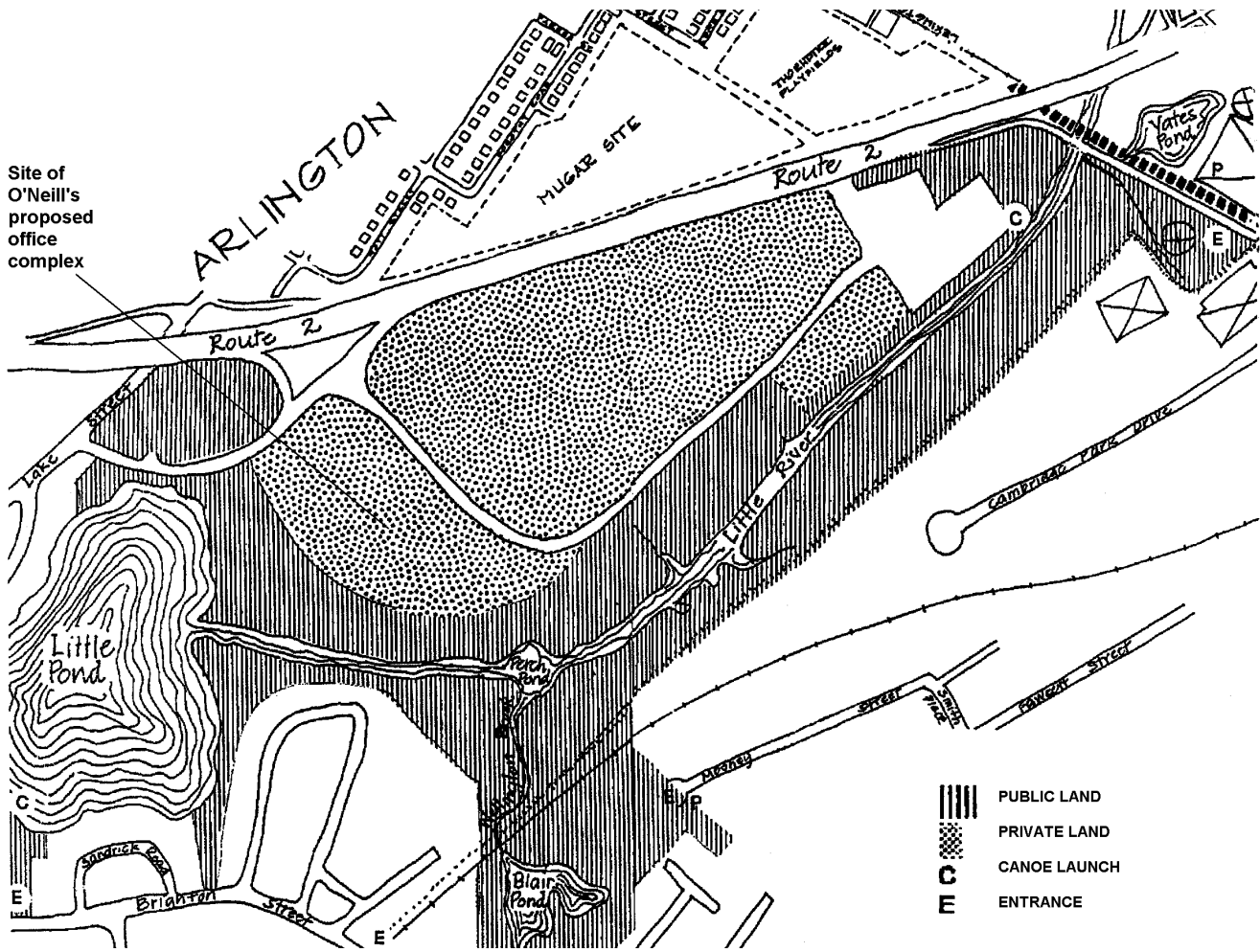
Traffic Spillover Likely

Those are the arguments presented by those who favor development. But the traffic report submitted by the developers to the Planning Board on March 8 suggests a different conclusion. Traffic near Alewife at rush hours is already so clogged, the study shows, that several intersections, including Lake and Cross streets, are rated F now by traffic engineers. They will get worse over the next five years even if nothing is built. Add thousands of daily car trips generated by new development at Alewife, and it's inevitable that the traffic will spill over onto side streets all over town.

The example of the McLean development suggests that we can't be confident of getting a revenue windfall from Alewife either. Even now, McLean is costing the town hundreds of thousands of dollars a year for inspection personnel and related costs, with no offsetting income. Once construction starts, more revenue will come in but costs are predicted to soar.

"We should not think that development at Alewife is going to solve any of the fiscal problems that the town has," said state Representative Anne Paulsen, who is working to get the entire Alewife region declared an Area of Critical Environmental Concern under state law. "No community has been able to build its way out of financial difficulties. We need to make a decision whether this development at Alewife is really in the interest of Belmont."

— Sue Bass



A History of the Alewife Property

The Alewife area at the northeastern edge of Belmont is a remnant of the Great Swamp that once stretched from Fresh Pond to Spy Pond. It included large parts of what is now Belmont's Winn Brook neighborhood. This "primitive, beautiful wilderness," wrote William Brewster in 1906, once contained "reeds, bulrushes, wild rice and muskrats ... beautifully diversified by wooded or bushy swamps alternating with open grassy marshes." Up until the mid-nineteenth century, the water was good to drink, with no pollution.

But according to *An Alewife Area Ecology Guide*, by the Belmont naturalist Stewart Sanders, the quality of the landscape quickly declined in the late 1800s. Lagoons were filled in, water was diverted, and fish migrations slowed. Garbage dumping turned the now-stagnant water into a breeding ground for mosquitos carrying malaria.

The Metropolitan Parks Commission, ancestor of the Metropolitan District Commission, bought a portion of the land in the early 1900s. It drained the stagnant pools and restored some of the water flow, improving the swamp's ecological health. But development at Alewife didn't stop. Route 2 was built in the 1930s and widened in the 1960s. Fresh Pond Shopping Center was built in 1962. The Red Line extension was completed in 1984. In the 1990s, Cambridge allowed the construction of office towers south of the MDC reservation along Cambridge Park Drive.

Now O'Neill Properties wants to put 250,000 square feet of office or laboratory space on thirteen acres of Belmont land north of the MDC reservation; the Martignetti family and others have plans to develop the adjoining land in Cambridge; and the Mugar family would like to put 300,000 square feet of office space on an eighteen-acre parcel in East Arlington, directly across Route 2 from the O'Neill property. Citizens in all three communities are fighting the developments, but they face uphill battles.

— Sue Bass

Full Environmental Review Required for McLean Property

Robert Durand, the secretary of the Executive Office of Environmental Affairs, has ruled that the McLean development must undergo a comprehensive environmental review by the state before building can start. In a certificate dated March 2, Durand said the project requires review under the Massachusetts Environmental Policy Act (MEPA) because it exceeds several mandatory thresholds, specifically: the creation of ten or more acres of impervious surface, the generation of 3000 or more new vehicle trips per day, and the construction of 1000 or more parking spaces.

The scope of the mandatory review is broad. It requires, for example, that the hospital analyze alternative site layouts for the development that would reduce its impact on the environment, including at least one alternative that avoids the demolition of historic structures. (Under the current plan, eleven buildings dating from 1890 to 1927 will be razed.) McLean also must conduct archaeological examinations of two sites in the R&D zone that, according to the Massachusetts Historical Commission, “may provide significant information regarding the Native American history of the Belmont area.”

Other topics that require further study are wetlands protection, wastewater disposal, traffic mitigation and improvements to the pedestrian environment, conservation of agricultural land, the loss of vegetation due to construction, the impact of blasting during construction, and the way in which the project fits into local and regional growth plans.

The hospital had requested an abbreviated review process focusing mainly on hydrology issues. Town Administrator Mel Kleckner wrote a letter on behalf of the Board of Selectmen, who voted 2-1 in support of the hospital’s request, saying that the town and its consultants were already analyzing many of the issues normally considered in a draft Environmental Impact Report. The town planner, Tim Higgins, and the chair of the Belmont Historic District Commission, Richard Cheek, also sent letters outlining steps the town has taken to

address wastewater and stormwater issues and to preserve historic structures and landscapes.

But Durand’s office received nearly seventy other letters in support of the traditional full MEPA review, which involves a draft Environmental Impact Report (EIR) and a public comment period, followed by a final EIR that addresses the public’s concerns. Comments were received from the Massachusetts Historical Commission, the Massachusetts Audubon Society, the Charles River Watershed Association, the Massachusetts Department of Environmental Protection, State Representative Anne Paulsen, the Belmont Conservation Commission, the Belmont Land Trust, the McLean Open Space Alliance, and the Belmont Citizens Forum, as well as many individual residents of Belmont and surrounding towns.

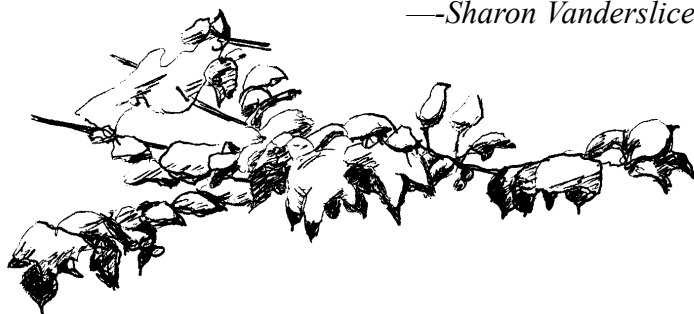
Comments were detailed and varied. They ranged from concerns about high levels of *E. Coli* in the intermittent stream above Pleasant Street to the effect of outdoor lighting on sky brightness to the need for regular shuttle-bus service to the Alewife T.

The President of Watertown Citizens for Environmental Safety wrote: “Although there have been meetings on the subject of McLean’s plans within Belmont, there has been little or no notification of the surrounding communities of Watertown, Waltham, Lexington, Arlington, or Cambridge.”

“The impact of a project of this magnitude does not stop at the Town line,” wrote one Arlington resident. “Failure to engage the surrounding municipalities in the comment process from the beginning is in my opinion a significant omission.”

The MEPA review process is expected to take months. When the draft Environmental Impact Report is completed, it will be made available to the public at the Belmont Public Library. A copy may also be obtained directly from McLean’s consultant, Vanasse Hangen Brustlin, on a first-come, first-serve basis.

—Sharon Vanderslice



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McLean Hearings, continued from page 11

light pollution. There are even plans to light up trees on the property.

Accommodations for bicycle commuters.

Although the developers are responsible for mitigating traffic increases, the R&D developer has not made a binding commitment to provide lockers and showers, which encourage commuter to use bicycles. The developer has said only that he will discuss the idea with his tenants at some unspecified date.

Shuttle-bus access. Shuttle buses would be more effective if they served the entire development, including the townhouses and the hospital. This would require an amendment to the current McLean by-law, which does not allow buses to pass through the traffic gates that separate the R&D and senior

complexes from the hospital and townhouse zones.

Fixing intersections. McLean's traffic experts, Rizzo Associates, recommended improvements at fourteen Belmont intersections that are already at or near full capacity. McLean is providing funds to improve only two of these intersections: Pleasant and Trapelo and the new intersection of Pleasant Street with the site driveway that will serve the senior and R&D complexes. The Planning Board has made no mention of plans or estimates to improve the remaining twelve intersections, including the congested ones in and around Belmont Center. The town seems to be counting on real estate taxes from the McLean site to help cover existing school and maintenance expenses. How do we plan to pay for the traffic improvements recommended at the remaining intersections?



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People Are Asking

Can Alewife Still Be Saved?

There are two contrasting views of the thirteen-acre O'Neill property sandwiched between the Metropolitan District Commission reservation at Alewife and Route 2. To some people, it represents natural beauty that happens to have the very practical side-effect of keeping Belmont basements dry (or at least preventing the flooding from being worse). To others, it represents a possible source of cash to keep Belmont's public services afloat.

The land, which lies just north of the MDC's Alewife Reservation, was bought in 1999 from the Arthur D. Little consulting firm by O'Neill Properties, the developer of the office complex at the former Watertown Arsenal. Though cars whiz by on the Route 2 side, O'Neill's thirteen acres are undeveloped. A few steps off Acorn Park Drive and you're in what feels like a wilderness. It is one of the last remnants of the region's historic Great Swamp. *(See related article, page 13.)*

A year ago, saving these thirteen acres was a high priority for Belmont's selectmen. In their letter to townspeople in the town's 1999 Annual Report, the selectmen said, "The entire land is environmentally sensitive and critical to the effective stormwater drainage system for Belmont." It is part of the flood plain for the Little River, which carries about 70 percent of Belmont's stormwater runoff. Flooded basements all over town, but especially in the former swampland that is now the Winn Brook section of Belmont, would be even worse if Alewife were not there to soak up the water.

A distinguished committee appointed by the selectmen to study the property recommended preservation of the Belmont Uplands for open space. With the naturalist Stewart Sanders, a member of the Alewife Study Committee, taking the lead, the town talked with the Trust for Public Land about getting assistance in buying the property.

However, the Trust for Public Land can't buy the land as a gift for Belmont; it can only help put together a deal. The price may well be less than the \$8 million calculated by a town appraisal. I've heard

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