



# Belmont Citizens Forum

## Belmont's Decarbonization Path Stays Uncertain

By Brian Kopperl and Roger Wrubel

In the 2024 [July/August BCF Newsletter](#), the Belmont Energy Committee (EC) updated BCF readers on the committee's work to advance Belmont's decarbonization efforts. The EC is now encouraging the town to pursue Climate Leader Community certification, to give the school department the option to acquire several electric school buses and to apply for a new Mass Save grant to fund a town energy manager to help the town obtain and manage decarbonization and energy efficiency grants to meet the town's [Climate Roadmap goals](#) adopted in 2019.

### Climate Leaders Communities

The Department of Energy Resources (DOER) recently created a new statewide program, [Climate Leader Communities \(CLC\)](#). CLC is an extension of the DOER's long-running Green Communities program, for which Belmont qualified in 2014. Municipalities certified as CLCs become eligible for enhanced grant funding for decarbonizing town buildings.

Each program offers competitive grants. Green Communities grants fund energy efficiency improvements for municipal buildings and purchases of electric vehicles and electric vehicle charging equipment. CLC grants are expected to be larger, funding energy efficiency but adding grants of up to \$1 million for municipal solar and other sustainability capital expenses such as electrifying building heating systems.

As we previously reported, municipalities must meet six requirements to be certified as a CLC. Belmont has already achieved three:

1. Green Community status
2. Adoption by Town Meeting of the Specialized Energy Code (now in effect in Belmont as of January 1, 2025)
3. Establishment of an Energy or Sustainability Committee In addition, qualifying municipalities must have:

4. An Emissions-Free Vehicle First (EV-First) procurement policy (the EC provided a draft policy to the Select Board in June 2022, which has yet to be acted upon). The DOER also provides a [model EV-First policy](#).
5. A commitment by the Select Board or Town Meeting to eliminate all fossil fuel use in its buildings and vehicles by 2050.
6. A decarbonization roadmap that demonstrates how the commitment in Item 5 will be realized.

Regarding Item 6, DOER has offered municipalities grants to pay all the costs of a consultant to create the decarbonization plan—approximately \$15,000. On October 5, 2024, the EC alerted the chair of the Select Board, the town administrator, and the director of facilities to the availability of this grant with a November 29 deadline. After receiving no reply, the EC co-chair appeared at the Select Board meeting on October 28 and was told that the town would not devote any time to this grant before the November 29 deadline because of the upcoming Special Town Meeting.

We encourage the Select Board and town to allocate \$15,000 for a decarbonization study to pave the way for Belmont to become a CLC and thereby unlock much larger grants while advancing the decarbonization policies that Town Meeting has addressed with overwhelming support in 2009 and 2019.

### Electric School Buses

The EC has been encouraging Belmont schools to begin their transition away from diesel towards electric school buses. Town Meeting strongly encouraged this transition in 2023, voting overwhelmingly to approve the use of long-term leases and subscription agreements to facilitate the procurement of electric vehicles including school buses.

Recently, the EC alerted the superintendent and the school chief financial officer to the upcoming

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**Belmont Citizens Forum Inc.** is a not-for-profit organization that strives to maintain the small-town atmosphere of Belmont, Massachusetts, by preserving its natural and historical resources, limiting traffic growth, and enhancing pedestrian safety. We do this by keeping residents informed about planning and zoning issues, by participating actively in public hearings, and by organizing forums.

The *BCF Newsletter* is published six times a year, in January, March, May, July, September, and November. Published material represents the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the Belmont Citizens Forum.

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January 9 deadline for Belmont to apply for \$500,000 in federal EPA Clean School Bus grants. The grant would cover a substantial portion of three electric buses while federal money is still available and before the new federal administration takes over.

Sadly, the grant opportunity was not considered timely for Belmont schools, even though the EC had arranged for Highland Fleets to complete the EPA application on behalf of Belmont. Highland also confirmed that grant awardees are free to decline the grant if they choose or to work with other vendors if successful.

Notwithstanding this, the EC will present to the School Board about electric bus procurement in spring 2025. The committee hopes that the board will include electric buses in the fall 2025 school bus service request for vendor proposals (RFP). Adding the EV bus component to the next RFP may well attract additional school bus vendors to compete, especially at a time when the schools are forecasting a \$300,000 increase in school busing costs next year.

It is our understanding that Eastern Bus, for decades, has been the only vendor to respond to the Belmont schools' RFPs. The lack of competition for Belmont's contract cannot serve the taxpayers well.

The authors recently visited the Dracut school bus lot operated by Beacon Mobility, which runs a large fleet of diesel and electric buses for various towns including Andover, Lowell, and Lawrence. The fleet supervisor and drivers confirmed that electric buses are superior to diesel and have plenty of range to operate across a geographically small town like Belmont. Not surprisingly, we found the electric bus much quieter than diesel buses. Our seasoned driver, Kevin, relayed that students seem much calmer aboard electric buses since they don't have to yell over the engine, that the buses are easier to drive, and are better in the snow than diesel engine buses.

### **Decarbonization Staff Resources and an Energy Manager Grant**

One of the more challenging aspects of the EC's efforts is that there is no town staff with a clear decarbonization mandate or job responsibility to engage in efforts to decarbonize the town and follow through on valuable grant opportunities. Without clear internal town staff ownership and reporting authority, the EC believes it will



Energy Committee chair Brian Kopperl visits the Beacon Mobility electric bus yard in Dracut.

be difficult for the town to advance the Climate Roadmap policies adopted by Town Meeting.

The EC has communicated the availability of several grant opportunities to further the town's decarbonization goals without success. For example, even though the town is eligible to apply for Green Communities grants every year, the town has not submitted a Green Communities grant since 2017. Other neighboring towns successfully apply for grants of up to \$200,000 per year.

The town administrator's publicly stated position has been that Belmont does not have sufficient staff to manage grant-funded decarbonization and energy-efficiency projects. In December 2022, the EC proposed that Belmont hire a sustainability grants manager, either as a part-time staff position

or as a contractor, to pursue energy efficiency and decarbonization grants ([belmontclimateaction.org/resources](http://belmontclimateaction.org/resources)). The proposal was rejected by the Select Board.

There is now an opportunity to address staff limitations. The EC has alerted the town administrator's office that Mass Save is currently accepting applications for grant proposals to fund full-time, part-time, or contracted energy manager positions within municipalities for three years. The grants are competitive, with awards up to \$120,000/year for a full-time position.

Were Belmont successful in winning a grant, it would allow town leaders to see whether this position is financially beneficial and is effective in reducing the town's carbon emissions as we have committed to do. The energy manager could also relieve current staff of some responsibilities, such as gathering data and writing the annual Green Communities report, applying for Green Community grants, filing for and monitoring federal rebates the town is entitled to under the Inflation Reduction Act and being the go-to person to advise departments on the availability of state and federal incentives for purchasing electric vehicles and charging equipment. We recently met with the town administrator and

other town staff and were assured the town would apply for a part-time energy manager position through Mass Save prior to the January 31, 2025, deadline.

One final update: The Specialized Energy Building Code went into effect, in Belmont, on January 1, 2025. The DOER code, which was adopted by Town Meeting, will encourage developers to construct new homes that are all electric and multifamily buildings that meet passive house standards.

*Brian Kopperl and Roger Wrubel are co-chairs of the Belmont Energy Committee.*

# BCF Asks State to Suspend SGAR Registration

*The following letter was sent to the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources on December 16, 2024.*

Dear Members of the Pesticide Board Subcommittee,

The Belmont Citizens Forum, a nonprofit organization dedicated to the preservation and enhancement of the environmental quality of Belmont and surrounding areas, strongly supports the suspension of the registration and legal use of Second-Generation Anticoagulant Rodenticides (SGARs) in Massachusetts.

The Belmont Citizens Forum publishes a bimonthly newsletter that informs residents about local environmental and community issues. Recent editions have featured articles detailing the dangers of SGARs, including their impacts on wildlife, ecosystems, and public health. These articles aim to educate the community on the importance of adopting safer, more sustainable pest control measures and have sparked important conversations among residents and local policymakers.

These chemicals pose severe and unnecessary risks to our wildlife, ecosystems, and public health, and safer alternatives are readily available. SGARs, including brodifacoum, bromadiolone, difenacoum,

and difethialone, are designed to target rodents but have devastating unintended consequences for nontarget species. Wildlife such as hawks, owls, foxes, coyotes, and other predators often consume poisoned rodents, leading to secondary poisoning and death. These effects ripple through our ecosystems, disrupting natural predator-prey dynamics and threatening biodiversity.

Scientific studies and reports from wildlife rehabilitation centers have documented the widespread presence of SGAR residues in the tissues of affected animals, underscoring the pervasive impact of these toxicants. In addition to harming wildlife, SGARs pose risks to domestic pets and, in some cases, children who may inadvertently come into contact with bait stations.

We request that you acknowledge the Harvard Law School Animal Law & Policy Clinic petition and suspend the registration of all SGARs as they fail to meet the Massachusetts Pesticide Control Act's registration standards because they cause "unreasonable adverse effects to the environment."

The Belmont Citizens Forum advocates for adopting Integrated Pest Management (IPM) practices and the use of safer alternatives to SGARs, such as non-anticoagulant baits and electric or mechanical traps. These methods effectively control rodent populations while minimizing harm to nontarget species and the environment. Municipalities, businesses, and residents across Massachusetts have successfully implemented such alternatives, demonstrating their feasibility and efficacy.

We commend the Massachusetts Department of Agricultural Resources for considering measures to protect our environment and public health. By suspending the registration of SGARs, Massachusetts can lead the way in promoting responsible pest management practices that align with our shared commitment to sustainability and ecological integrity.

Thank you for your attention to this critical issue. We urge you to act decisively to protect our wildlife, ecosystems, and communities from the harmful impacts of SGARs. Please do not hesitate to reach out to the Belmont Citizens Forum if we can provide additional information or support.



Hawk found dead on Prospect Street, Belmont, on December 15, 2024.

# Belmont's Owls are Calling, and Dying

by Fred Bouchard

With its regal size and stern, brow-knit mien, the Great Horned Owl (*Bubo virginianus*, GHO) stands as not just a sagacious symbol of wisdom but as a fearsome, widespread nocturnal raptor. Its namesake horns, conspicuous 2-inch erect ear tufts, help triangulate aurally on prey. Aptly called a “tiger among birds” by ornithologist Frank Chapman, these owls once raided chicken coops. Today they are the scourge of smaller birds (even smaller owls) and suburban mammals like rabbits and rodents.

And therein lies their unique vulnerability. As apex avian predators, owls—along with hawks and eagles—are subject to being victimized by man's unrestrained usage of poisons to curb rodent infestations. This subject has been widely discussed in the media of late, and more urgently locally. Recent Great Horned Owl deaths by rodenticide poisoning in Belmont were reported in November from Habitat Sanctuary (11/7) and a Cushing Square residence (11/17). [A dead hawk was also found on December 16 in a Prospect Street backyard. As of

*this publication, SGAR rodenticide poisoning is suspected, but testing is still ongoing. - Ed]*

My home is about equidistant between those points; I've seen and heard owls often over the last year. I wondered out loud to neighbors: “Would the owls ever visit our street again?”

Great Horned Owls' range is the widest among all Western Hemisphere owls: bicoastal from Canada throughout Central to Tierra del Fuego in southern South America. In the Bay State, they're absent only on the islands. Inhabitants of deep woods and forests, Great Horned Owls are opportunity nesters, squatting in abandoned crow, hawk, or squirrel nests. Despite their size, averaging nearly two feet tall, they're heavily camouflaged by dark barring, and thus infrequently spotted by day (with insider tips and much patience) in deep coniferous woods at Belmont's Mass Audubon's Habitat Sanctuary, Arlington's Menotomy Rocks Park, Woburn's Horn Pond, and Newton's Cold Spring Park. Only four were recorded on the 2023 Greater Boston Christmas Bird Count, but six on 2024's count: a pair duetting at Habitat, and four in the Fells.



SHAWN CAREY

Great Horned Owl.

My personal sightings of Great Horned Owls in Middlesex County have been limited to a pair that inhabited the spruce dell in Mount Auburn Cemetery (2014-18) and rare crepuscular glimpses from our Winn Brook home. Of interest may be recent [E-bird entries](#), in my case mostly midnight audio analyses from second-floor windows. Here they are:

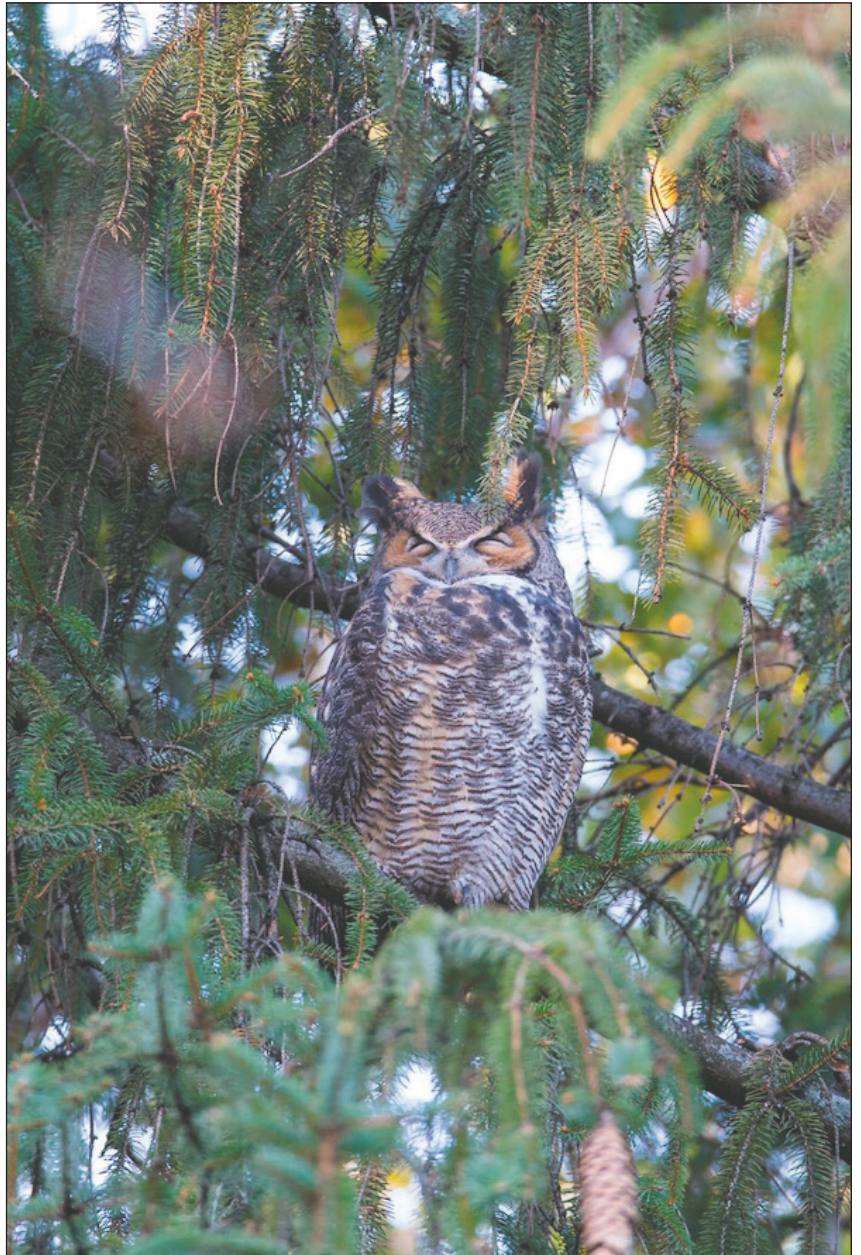
10/1/2023, 2:45-3:15 AM: *Mellow duo across Cross Street, hooted on minor third (C to E), call and response, with dissonant overlap. Tempo moderato (quarter note = 75); decibels low (20-25). Occasional triplets. Eventually, lower voice dropped out or moved on, and upper voice settled into three-note legato sequences with longer rests.*

10/29/2023, 1:25, 4 AM: [Musical notation from middle C]: 1:25am: Owl 1: G, G', rest. Owl 2 (faint): G, G', rest, rest. Pause; repeat, 6-7 times. 4:00am: Owl 1: G, G, G, rest. Owl 2 (faint): B, B, [B], rest. Pause, repeat, with variations, 2-3 times.

11/5/2023, 4:45 AM: Musical notation of brief dialogue out window: owl #1: triplets on G; owl #2: minims on A. My impetuous, unfortunate vocal 'imitation' out the window drew—silence.

11/29/2023, 4:40 PM: Clear dusk. I hear "my local" GHOs outside the window, unusually early. Go to front yard to hear clearly. Call my neighbor Harry over as he parks next door. I point out the owls' distinctive triplet, one low / one a third higher (say, C / E). As we listen, one flies in silhouette to the top of a 40-foot spruce not 50 yards down the street. Within seconds, the other flies beside the first: then they mate with a flap of wings for eight to ten seconds. Harry and I look at each other in astonished disbelief and high-five!

12/20/2023, 3:15 AM: Woken from light sleep to now-familiar "huh-HOO-HOO-huh" of season's GHOs, continued in duo with mate slightly softer (further off?) until 3:30 AM. I run to windows, but they are likely in spruces (between Farnham and Alexander Streets) where they were last heard and seen. [Daytime scouting reconnaissance came up empty.] The near owl moves away, but I note a softer duo until I doze off. A third bird responds farther off.



Great Horned Owl.

1/6/2024, 2:30-3 AM: Epiphany hootenanny! Two or three GHOs 5-hooting antiphonally on C & E, often overlapping. Not spotted by silhouette in bare deciduous trees, but may be in the facing tall spruces. [Note: a few brief hearings in the interim, including a single, blood-curdling scream from either a known nesting Red Fox vixen or a GHO. A 60-foot Norway maple, situated 50 yards behind my house, was felled in July; its absence likely altered the dynamics of owl perches and communication, though GHOs favor conifers.]

10/27/2024, 4:45 AM: 40F, still, clear, pre-dawn. Through ajar bedroom window, I clearly hear quavery but measured low hoots that send chills up my back. GHOs every 12-15": triplet, quarter-



Snowy Owl.

*note, quarter-note. Overlapping 1/2 tone above second owl. A third owl, almost subliminal, calls further off. Initially I go to front window, where I heard an owl two weeks ago. Dialog continues, unhurried, for several minutes: hiatus; then sporadic. I doze off, then wake to a position shift: one nearer, in duet with one further off: same pattern, but whole tone higher.*

In mid-November, we were enlightened by a Beaver Supermoon, so-called because it's



Eastern Screech Owl.

the darkest and chilliest month of the waning year, when beavers refresh their lodges. Normally a spur for owl activity, it proved locally disappointing, with nary a hint of a hoot in my environs over three long, shining nights. Were the local owls silenced by extreme drought (30% humidity) and unseasonable temperatures (45° at 3 AM), caused by elevated atmospherics? Were they decimated by relentless, thoughtless—and ultimately counterproductive—rodenticide use?

In the wee hours after The Big Rain (11/22), I was woken by a brief kerfuffle among American Crows that may have been triggered by a large owl, possibly a Great Horned Owl or Barred Owl. Will we hear them again?

Belmont Acres farmer Mike Chase reported a pre-dawn GHO hooting in the Payson Park neighborhood on 12/9; he heard it again during the night, and next morning discovered the remains of a rabbit—not likely a fatal dinner for that lucky owl.

*Fred Bouchard is a member of the Belmont Citizens Forum Newsletter Committee and a semi-centennial member of the Brookline Bird Club.*

*Shawn Carey is a globetrotting nature photographer and videographer; his avian portraits have graced all six recent BCF Newsletter bird essays. View his work at [migrationproductions.com](http://migrationproductions.com).*

# Belmont Takes a Few Steps Back from ‘Fiscal Cliff’

By Allison Lenk and Robie White

Two years ago, the Belmont Citizens Forum Newsletter published the article, “[Have You Read the Collins Center Report?](#)”

The 2022 report, produced by the Edwards J. Collins, Jr. Center for Public Management,\* stresses the urgency of acting on their recommendations which were initially made in 2018. The earlier report included a warning that Belmont would be falling off a “fiscal cliff” in the future if changes weren’t pursued.

The report notes that, at the time, the average Belmont homeowner paid \$15,568 annually in property taxes, or approximately 15.73% of Belmont’s per-capita income. Among 12 comparable towns, Belmont had the second-highest real estate tax bills (after Brookline) and more than double the tax rate (as a percentage of income) of Weston, Wellesley, Sherborn, and Dover.

The Collins Center report states:

*When housing costs and property tax levels are considered in conjunction with Belmont’s per capita incomes, it becomes clearer that the town is asking far more of its residential taxpayers than its comparable peers.*

The reports also recommended changes to Belmont’s governing structure and financial operations.

*The town’s executive branch is not configured in a way that aligns authority, responsibility, and accountability. This structure is more common in towns with populations below 10,000 residents and much smaller budgets.*

In June 2022, the Select Board issued its ranking of the urgency/importance and progress-to-date for each major recommendation of the Collins Center.

At that time, Select Board member Adam Dash stated, “I believe that we need to move quickly on implementing the bulk of the recommended changes so Belmont can fix its structural deficit.” The Structural Change Impact Group translated the recommendations into specific actions that should improve Belmont’s finances and operations and therefore should be pursued. The recent passage of the \$8.4M override, plus the additional taxes stemming from two debt exclusions (new library and new rink) and the annual tax levy created a typical tax increase of 11% to 13%. This is an opportune time to revisit the Collins Center recommendations and update which of those have been completed, which are in process, and which have yet to be addressed.

Below are seven of those recommendations.

1. Align the annual budget process with established best practices as set out by the MA Division of Local Services, including “reaching consensus on all financial forecasts.”
2. Build a financial management team with an appointed finance director and more clearly define and strengthen the powers and duties of the Select Board and town administrator.
3. Examine and develop all sources of revenue to reduce the structural deficit, including payment in lieu of taxes (PILOT agreements), municipal fees, and local receipts. Refocus planning and economic development to attract an appropriate level of commercial and/or industrial activity.
4. Reduce or end reliance on free cash and other “one-time” revenues to balance the operating budget.
5. Develop a comprehensive strategy for reducing overall expenses and prioritizing adequate cash reserves.

## The Collins Center

\*The Edward J. Collins, Jr. Center for Public Management is part of the McCormack Graduate School of Policy and Global Studies at the University of Massachusetts Boston.

This think tank is dedicated to improving efficiency, effectiveness, governance, and accountability at all levels of government, with a particular focus on state and local government and provides a comprehensive set of services to scores of the Commonwealth’s cities, towns, school districts, state agencies, and many municipalities in other states.



6. Review the capital planning process and seek to conform it to best practices by “ensuring that current and future capital needs are addressed in a comprehensive and financially sound manner.”
7. Repair or replace the antiquated and malfunctioning computer-assisted mass property appraisal system.

Several important changes have been implemented since the issuance of the Collins Report.

The town hired a finance director and changed the treasurer and Board of Assessors from elected to appointed positions. The Board of Assessors is newly configured with the assessing administrator joining two newly appointed members.

The Board of Assessors recently put out to bid a request for proposal (RFP) for a new real estate appraisal and tax software system called CAMA (computer-assisted mass appraisal system), an action that had been recommended for several years.

The Vision 21 Implementation Committee and Economic Development Committee are continuing their work to increase commercial tax revenue through zoning reforms and streamlining the process for permits. Town Meeting has already approved changes to attract restaurants. A consulting contract via RFP for a Comprehensive Plan is being finalized.

PILOT agreements with nonprofit organizations have been almost completely lacking. The Select Board recently asked the town administrator and finance director to work with the assessors to identify the 10 to 11 wealthiest nonprofits in town and send PILOT request letters to them during this calendar year. These letters will provide a record of requesting financial support for town-provided services, with summaries of the town services the nonprofits receive. Evidence of request letters has not been readily available from the assessors in the past. The Collins Center Report stresses the importance of taking time, making effort and commitment to build strong partnerships with the nonprofits, and developing guidelines for PILOT implementation that will ensure the process is equitable.

Belmont’s pension obligations have been a major factor in its financial challenges. The Retirement Board has finally agreed to move its remaining investments to the Massachusetts Pension Reserves Investment Trust, managed by Pension Reserves

Investment Management. The Trust has consistently outperformed the prior investment strategies, and this change is expected to help fully fund the pension plan, according to at least one Warrant Committee member.

The Collins Center report states that “A critical step in maintaining a sound financial plan is the preparation of a multiyear revenue/expenditure forecast.” This lack of long-term forecasts has led to a void of information when large capital or infrastructure financial decisions need to be made. Too often, this has led to reliance on free cash or other one-time funds, without consideration of the long-term impact.

Long-term forecasting with a three-year budget model has been initiated during sequential Budget Summits involving members of the Financial Team, School, Warrant, Comprehensive Capital Budget Committees, and the Select Board in a unified process. A Warrant Committee member interviewed for this article expects that these forecasts will be extended to five- and 10-year budget models. There has been agreement on the need to build and maintain reserves to ensure Belmont will be financially secure if the unexpected occurs; this led to the establishment of an override mitigation fund to delay the need for another override.

Prior to the April 2024 override vote, Belmont municipal and school officials stated their intent to draw up a “fiscal compact,” promising to limit annual spending growth. Other towns have executed a similar agreement. Prior to their most recent override, Arlington officials committed to restraining annual municipal spending growth to 3.25% and school spending growth to 3.5%, which more closely aligns with the annual Proposition 2 ½ tax increase of 2.5%. This plan helps to curtail the need for frequent overrides.

In contrast, Belmont’s 2025 budget shows an overall increase of 5.7%; included in that total is a 6.4% increase in spending in the school department (Warrant Committee FY2024 Budget Presentation). Citing a lack of time to come to an agreement, town officials made no formal commitment to controlling spending growth before the April 2024 override vote. The town website indicates that the fiscal compact will be completed in advance of the fall FY26 Budget Summits.

The Collins Center report (Finding 2.2) states that the town lacks a comprehensive strategy for reducing overall expense.

*Despite prior reports and significant evidence, the Town has not moved in the direction in any substantial way of controlling costs or the growth of future spending. Despite this, there are significant examples throughout operations of areas where costs could be controlled and, at the very least, future growth could be contained. For example, the Belmont School District offers a higher percentage for the employer share of health insurance costs than the Town of Belmont, at 80% (compared to the Town's 75%/25% split between the municipality and employees). Energy consumption is another factor – despite significant efforts to “green” the Town's energy consumption and reduce its carbon footprint, the footprint of newer, more energy-conscious buildings is larger and can not only increase energy expenses but can also increase carbon outputs due to the larger physical space which must be heated and cooled throughout the year. When the prospect of cost control measures are brought up—however mild—they are met with significant opposition.*

The Collins Center observations are most recently evidenced by the current budget already nearly depleting the 2024 override dollars. Just \$930K of the \$8.4M override remains in reserve. Limiting future spending growth and establishing stronger financial stewardship are critical to Belmont's long-term fiscal sustainability. The fiscal compact must reflect controlled spending growth more closely aligned with the state-authorized

Proposition 2½ annual tax revenue increase, not unfulfilled promises for spending constraint and a plan for another override in three years or less.

Many of the Collins Center recommendations have been addressed, or are in the process of being addressed. However, as the Collins Center highlighted in its 2022 Transmittal Letter:

*The Collins Center only rarely provides transmittal letters for our reports. When we do so, it is because we hope to bring extra focus from municipal leaders and residents to the issues we are raising. In this particular case, we are taking that step because we believe the challenges facing the town are significant and because they go beyond the nominal scope of our work and the report submitted by our Project Team.*

Are municipal and school officials ready to act now to ensure that this is the beginning of a long-term fiscally prudent process to tackle our unsustainable spending? Residents have a right to have that question answered through regular updates from town and school officials on the progress of advancing these recommendations.

*Allison Lenk is a retired literacy specialist and Precinct 8 Town Meeting member.*

*Robie White is a retired financial executive who served on the Belmont Warrant Committee for seven years.*

## Write for the BCF Newsletter!

The BCF is looking for writers at all experience levels and all ages to write for our bimonthly newsletter. The *BCF Newsletter* provides in-depth coverage of local and regional issues including environmental protection, historic preservation, economic development, transportation, bicycling and pedestrian safety, and town planning and zoning.

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The Belmont Citizens Forum is a community organization that strives to preserve Belmont's natural and historical resources, limit traffic growth, and enhance pedestrian safety.

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# Profiles in Belmont: Dr. Gi Yoon-Huang

By Elissa Ely

In this rough world, there are those who turn to all sides with grievance and rage. But there are also those who turn with care and gentleness—and if they happen to turn with medical expertise as well, the rough world is fortunate. They are treasures. Here is one.

Gi Yoon Huang, MD—co-director of the Belmont Celebrates Asian American Pacific Islander Heritage group, Town Meeting member, and member of multiple Belmont committees—was born in South Korea. Her parents had moved to Virginia from their impoverished, war-battered country (“it was their American dream”), but her mother returned briefly back to give birth.

Immigrant life in the United States was challenging, and Gi was raised as an only child in South Korea by her maternal grandmother. She remembers sitting in streams of sunlight next to this gentle, calm being, looking together through a pile of beans, separating out the pebbles from the dinner. Companionable love was the first constant of her life. “In medicine, you see heartache and joy,” she says, “and I was so well-grounded by a grandmother who doted on me.”

When she was six, Gi moved to Virginia to live with her father. Her gentle, calm grandmother could not follow her, but lived to see Gi become a physician, and also lived to meet her two great-grandchildren when they visited Korea, before she declined during the first COVID-19 wave.

Gi’s father, at 85, is still a designer, builder, and woodworker. His passion, though—his great involvement—was advocating in the US for Korean recognition and appreciation. “He was seized by a desire to help Koreans,” Gi says, which led him to an unpaid second career. He created the Korean Heritage Foundation, and among other projects,



Dr. Gi Yoon Huang.

brought exhibitions to the Smithsonian and the Kennedy Center. Proximity to his untiring volunteerism was the second constant in Gi’s life.

Speaking no English, she struggled during her first few years to know what others were saying. It would have been natural to wander without direction. But when she was 12, Gi discovered Christianity (her grandmother had been Buddhist), and this has been the third, perhaps most imperative, constant of her life. “I ended up finding faith,” she says. “It was a saving grace. It gave me life guidance.”

When she went to medical school, her intention was to work as a medical missionary, “helping the most needy of the world in the most practical way.”

COURTESY OF DR. GI YOON HUANG

General surgery seemed the relevant specialty, and she had inherited “some hand-crafty genes.” But surgical training is especially grueling. “I was getting mean and snippy, a wilted flower growing more wilted. I couldn’t serve people, being nasty.”

Ophthalmology uses hand-crafty genes, too, but differently. “The eye is intricate, beautiful. You’re not destroying things, you’re doing repair. I can’t watch blood and gore in a movie, but an eye surgery is controlled.”

Gi fell in love with pediatric ophthalmology, where effects can last a lifetime. Through the Boston Medical Center, she works with children from group homes and foster care, infants to teens, often long-term, and often underinsured or uninsured.

The diagnoses she specializes in cause visual impairments but also psychological ones; no child wants to gaze at their peers out of eyes that cross or wander. “Hey, how are people treating you?” she’ll ask a young patient, and then take all the time an answer requires, even when other young patients are waiting. It’s missionary work.

As often happens, medical residency and fellowship training years were peripatetic, and Gi estimates she moved annually through most of them. But 12 years ago, she and her family arrived in Belmont, where roots went down and into the community. “It’s not only a dwelling,” she says. “This is my home. I embrace the idea of getting involved.”

She was pushing a stroller one day, her toddler buckled in and her newborn tucked into a Baby Bjorn carrier when she passed the green space in Belmont Center. She’d heard that part of it was slated to become a cut-through business driveway, a renovation that would have destroyed a place of congregation. “Before this, I’d had no political interest other than voting—being in medicine, I had no bandwidth,” she explains.

Ignited, she decided to become a Town Meeting member (the children she brought to meetings with her joined as unelected members), and realized she loved attending (their perspective was less clear). “I heard all opinions, and got to know people I wouldn’t know otherwise. It was like the Congress of Belmont.” Today, the green space remains green, and there is visual proof. “Ten years later, I see my daughter eating pizza and ice cream there.”

Recruitment into other committees followed: the Superintendent Search Committee, Police Chief Search Committee, ‘Yes to Belmont’ Committee for middle and high school building budget overrides, Safe Routes to School. “I so appreciate the number of people who volunteer with no direct return,” Gi says. “Belmont is a place run by volunteers, and it’s beautiful.”

Belmont Celebrates Asian-American Pacific Islander Heritage (BCAH) month started during the pandemic, when anti-Asian rhetoric was ballooning. In 2021, 10% of Belmont Asian American middle and high school students reported making a suicide plan. One Belmont school child spat at another. Intervention was imperative, and Gi became co-chair of the group.

It’s composed mostly of other parents. On the surface, the month they plan in May is filled with family activities: traditional dances, tae kwon do, raffles, speakers. There’s an essay contest, and courageous children can play a chess Grandmaster in simultaneous matches (he never loses).

Under the surface, though, it’s filled with education. More than 40% of Americans can’t name a famous Asian-American citizen. In addition to their May event, BCAH has donated hundreds of books, mostly biographies, to Belmont schools, not only to increase cultural recognition, but also to acknowledge, for Asian-American children, biases and mistreatment. “The information is given to our youth,” Gi explains, “so they know there’s a whole group that walked before them and also experienced these things.”

Meanwhile, there are patients to care for gently, and her own family where she wishes to be present in the quiet ways her grandmother was present for her. Immersion into volunteering has required balance. “The magic words are part-time work,” she says.

The other magic word is faith. “If I’m able to have a solid sense of hope that things will get better, I can delve fully into the grief of the current situation without going into despair. I’m in it, now. Each day, I’m trying to be faithful to what is good and right.”

*Elissa Ely is a community psychiatrist.*

# Homer House Restoration Gets Underway

By Wendy Murphy and Neal Winston

Driving down Concord Avenue from Belmont Hill into town, you can't help but notice the emergence of a stately Victorian mansion. A wall of trees hiding the mansion was removed this spring as part of a landscape restoration project for the back and side yards of the 1853 William Flaggs Homer House at 661 Pleasant Street. The Belmont Woman's Club owns the house and land. The project was sponsored and managed by the Belmont Land Trust, a volunteer nonprofit organization, which has held a conservation restriction on the property since 2010.

Long neglected, the Homer House backyard had become overgrown with invasive trees, shrubs, and weeds, shielding the back of the home that mirrors the beautiful architecture on the front of the house visible from Pleasant Street. With the help of Community Preservation Act funds, the Belmont Woman's Club commissioned an assessment of the Homer House several years ago to determine what repairs were needed to restore the property to its original beauty.

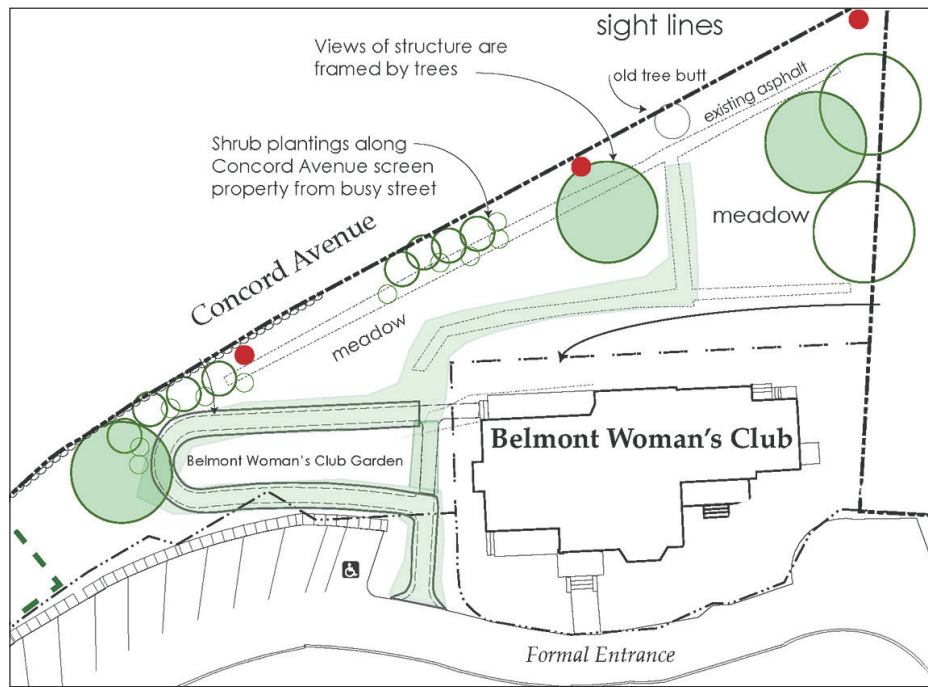
Key projects were undertaken to replace the driveway and install parking spots, restore the grand cupola, and repair and restore all the windows to make them functional and safe. The most recent project entails repainting the exterior to its original historically correct colors, and repairing decks, railings, and other exterior wooden features of the house that have not been addressed since the property was built.

The backyard restoration plan has specific guidelines: it must meet the limitations of the conservation restriction, be true to the historic and period architecture of the house, and also support contemporary conservation management techniques, including keeping or introducing only native plant species and trees that would also support local suburban wildlife. Landscape architect Margaret Nestler of Nestler Land Design in Harvard, Massachusetts, who drafted the original landscape study when the conservation restriction was created, returned to create a landscape plan that includes these requirements. The plan also includes an allowance for an accessible pathway from the parking area into the house, a modern and necessary adaptation.



PARTERRE DESIGN

The formerly overgrown side yard of the Homer House.



Detail of Homer House landscape plan.

The yard was overrun with Norway maples, Japanese knotweed, mugwort, garlic mustard, burdock, Tree of Heaven, pokeweed, poison ivy, and other undesirable or invasive plants. The Land Trust hired Parterre Ecological, a firm that has worked on other Belmont projects and specializes in property restoration involving invasives. Parterre began this multiyear project with tree cutting and progressed to treating and removing invasive plants. A biodegradable erosion blanket was laid down, and plugs of rattlesnake master; *Monarda* species, narrow leaf mountain mint; and blue flag iris were planted. Unfortunately, the months-long drought this year slowed growth and further planting, but replanting will continue in the spring.

The next steps in the restoration plan for the backyard require stump grinding, renewed planting of field grasses and other plants, and replacement of native trees. The current trees include sugar maple, yellowwood, catalpa, and oaks. Care must be taken to plant new trees to visually frame the house as they mature to keep open sight lines from the street.

A fieldstone wall along the length of Concord Avenue topped with cut granite will eventually need to be restored. The front yard embankment also suffered from the reconstruction of the driveway and parking area, and after debris removal and topsoil replacement, lawn grass will be replanted next spring. Continuing invasive plant removal and

treatment can take several years, particularly the knotweed.

Jean Devine, a Belmont resident and founder of Biodiversity Builders, a youth education program that provides summer internships in removing invasive species and replacing them with native plants, has introduced an interesting concept to the Land Trust called a *Miyawaki Forest* for the lower quadrant of the backyard closest to the intersection of Concord Avenue and Pleasant Street. Named after Japanese ecologist Akira Miyawaki, it is a pocket-sized densely grown "forest" of native trees sometimes only 40 feet by 20 feet or so in size. It is designed for tight urban and suburban areas, where it supports

the environment, including birds and small wild animals.

The Belmont Land Trust, a volunteer nonprofit organization, has owned a conservation restriction on the .9-acre area surrounding the house since 2010. A conservation restriction is a permanent titled grant of development rights on a property in which the granting owner has a strong conservation preservation interest to see that it is never further developed. The land trust has the duty to oversee that the original owner and successor owners maintain the property under the terms of the restriction. The land trust has similar restrictions on about 24 acres of other properties around town.

The Belmont Land Trust has expended over \$40,000 of its own funds on the project this past year, and it is expected that over the next several years, the total cost could run much higher. In cooperation with the Belmont Woman's Club, the land trust is planning to begin fundraising in January to develop an endowment fund for the continued construction and perpetual care of the grounds. If you are interested in hearing more about the landscaping project as it continues, participating in the fundraising, or being invited to our meetings at the Homer House, email us at [BLT@belmont-landtrust.org](mailto:BLT@belmont-landtrust.org).

The steadfast preservation of the property to date by the Belmont Woman's Club has its own inter-

esting history, with a recent critical twist. When the Woman's Club purchased the Homer House in 1927, it did so not only because it needed a big house to accommodate its hundreds of members but also because it wanted to save the beautiful mansion from destruction. A developer had purchased the property for \$25,000 and had plans to tear it down and build seven houses on the land. Once the center of activity for high society, the house was last owned by a woman with no heirs, and times were tough, so the mansion market wasn't hot.

The beautiful house on the hill was too important to tear down. It had been built by the wealthy Boston merchant William Flagg Homer. Uncle to famed American artist Winslow Homer, William Flagg spared no expense and designed a property that made national headlines for its architecture and style. Winslow Homer painted many pieces at the Homer House. His "croquet paintings" depict men and women playing croquet on the front lawn under massive European Beech trees, and his well-known *War: Women Making Havelocks For The Volunteers* shows women in the front parlor at the Homer House sewing hats for the Union soldiers during the Civil War. Winslow's parents lived nearby, but he spent most of his time at his uncle's house.

The Woman's Club knew it was important to save the Homer House. Along with thousands of women's clubs across the country, they were celebrating the 19th Amendment to the US Constitution, which granted women the right to vote. They needed a space where they could work together on women's issues. The Homer House was ideal. They conspired with town officials and pooled their money to purchase the property away from the developer. They quickly added electricity and began hosting educational and civic events and organizing community service activities to support those in need.

Over the years, it had become more costly to maintain and preserve the property, particularly the upkeep on the ornate exterior, to heat, and to insure it. By 2008 or so, there was talk among some members that they might be better off just selling the property and moving to a modern and easier-to-maintain building. Yet other members never wavered in their commitment to their forebears to hold and preserve the Homer House from potential development as an historic piece of Belmont.



WINSLOW HOMER

Winslow Homer's *War: Women Making Havelocks For The Volunteers*.

Despite the Homer House being in the highly restricted Belmont Historic District, they knew that once a developer bought the property, there would always be the potential for it to be destroyed. These members garnered a large majority of members to place the land around the house in a conservation restriction held by the Belmont Land Trust, ending any possible sale value to a developer. Thus the Homer House endures, and the Woman's Club and the Land Trust stand together in their commitment to protect and preserve Belmont's history for future generations.

Once a private organization open only to women, the Belmont Woman's Club is now a nonprofit charitable organization open to all and is eager to welcome new members—including men—who want to help preserve this important part of Belmont's history. Find out more at [belmontwomansclub.com](http://belmontwomansclub.com).

*Wendy Murphy is president of the Belmont Woman's Club.*

*Neal Winston is president of the Belmont Land Trust.*



Schematic drawing of the Lexington roundabout.

## Letter to the Editor

To the Editor:

I am looking at the September/October BCF Newsletter article, “Town Works to Make Streets Safer for All,” with plans for the roundabouts on Concord Avenue at Winter and Mill Streets. I favor roundabouts for the sake of traffic safety, and so I am in favor of most of the project.

The drawings, however, show a bikeway along the southwest side of Concord Avenue, narrow at the ends and widening as it passes two roundabouts,

where there are crosswalks, and ending on Mill Street. The bikeway serves only eastbound bicycle traffic. A sidewalk is shown on the northeast side of Concord Avenue and Winter Street, though there is presently none. There is an informal unpaved path part way along the west side of Mill Street.

I read on page 3: “The design requires taking about 60 feet from Rock Meadow conservation land at the roundabout near Winter Street and an approximately 20-foot-wide strip along Concord Avenue between the two roundabouts.”

But most of this taking is required for the bikeway, not the roundabouts. The bikeway makes



one-way connections to the streets, but in between, it is 10 feet or more wide as shown in the drawings, designed for two-way travel. Bicyclists will be few, because any plan to extend a bikeway along Concord Avenue and Mill Street would be extremely expensive and would involve a far larger taking of conservation land. The entrance at Winter Street is the only access point to the conservation land for a quarter mile or more in either direction, but a sidewalk on the northeast side might be extended farther than shown in the drawings and would serve the numerous residences there. In any case, roundabouts are intentionally designed to require motorists to travel at bicycle speed. Any bicyclist comfortable riding on Concord Avenue or Winter or Mill Street will be more comfortable riding through the roundabouts on the roadway! I have video illustrating this in the new roundabout at the Lexington Battle Green at [bit.ly/BCF-Cycle-Savvy](http://bit.ly/BCF-Cycle-Savvy).

The article describes the project area as “a spot where people get onto the conservation land, an

alternative to the jammed driveway that’s the official entrance.” Sidewalk and crosswalk improvements could certainly improve access for bicyclists and pedestrians. Perhaps parking could be provided at what appears to be a municipal storage area to the west on Concord Avenue (GPS coordinates: 42.405410, -71.202793).

My video shows an incidental benefit of roundabouts, by the way. They enable U-turns on any of the streets they serve. This feature can reduce congestion by eliminating the need to turn left near a roundabout and should be considered in the light of issues with access to Rock Meadow.

John S. Allen

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Municipal storage area, Concord Avenue, Belmont.



Viktoria Haase, BHS president, explains that the William Flagg Homer House, 1853, which is now home to the Belmont Woman’s Club, was the first to display a plaque. Plaques are hand-painted with black enamel paint.

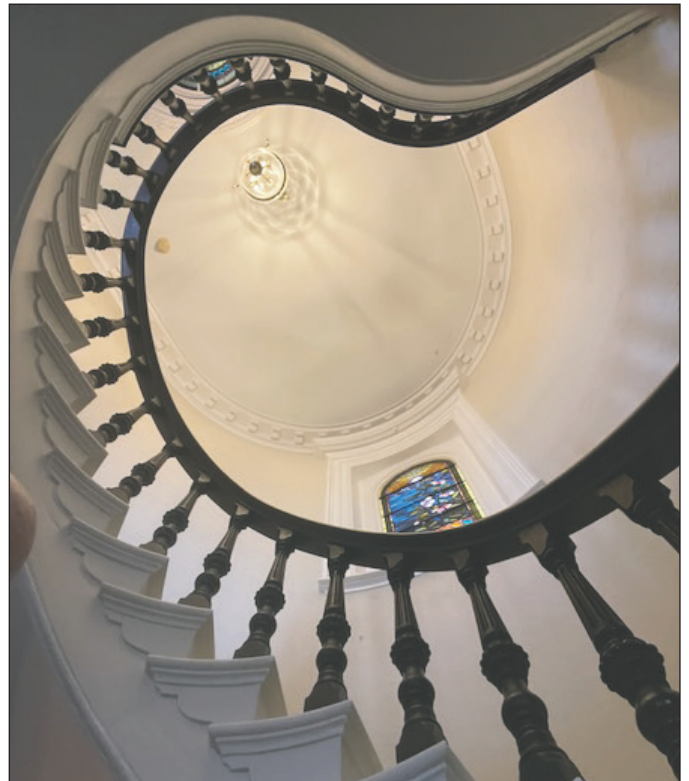
## Belmont’s Historic Home Plaques

The Belmont Historical Society (BHS) recently celebrated the 10-year anniversary of its historic home plaque program, with 45 plaques now displayed on historic homes around town.

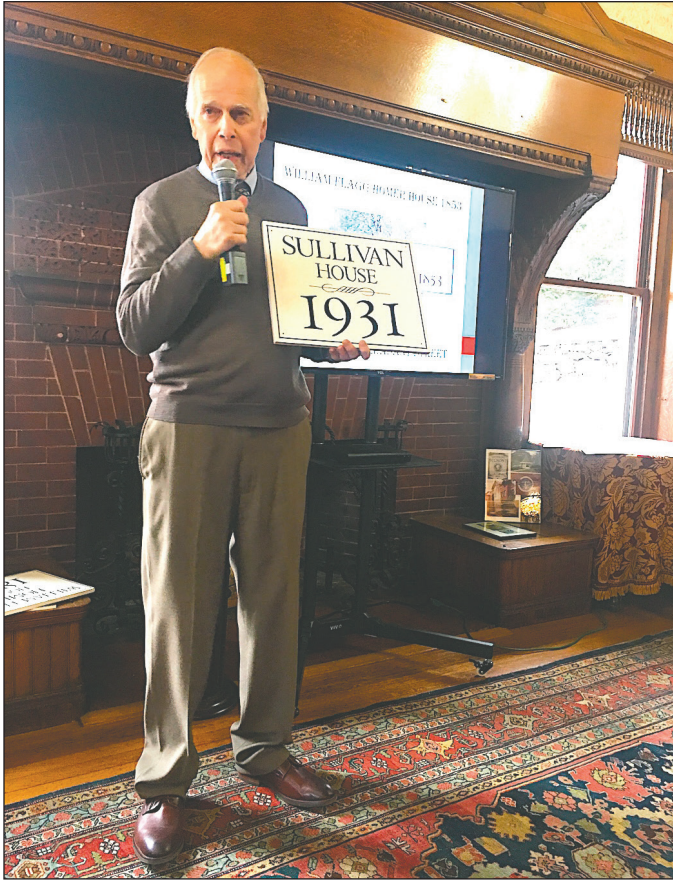
Belmont’s historic homes are greatly diverse in their architecture, ranging from Georgian to Victorian to Craftsman and mid-century modern.

To qualify for a plaque, a home must be at least 50 years old, retain its original design integrity, and have a clean chain of title. For more information about this program, contact [belmonthistory1859@gmail.com](mailto:belmonthistory1859@gmail.com).

*Photos by Evanthia Malliris and John Beaty.*



Staircase at the William Flagg Homer House.



Phil Hughes displays the Sullivan House plaque.

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