

IF I MAY: After All, This Is Our Town!



There was a time in Belmont, not so very long ago, when the public rarely made its views known beyond what it did at the polls. Even now, it's not that often that people get upset enough about municipal issues to insist on speaking out about them. When they do get that upset, speaking out — and being heard by the authorities — should be easy. But, as the past few years have shown, speaking out and being heard is not always a walk in the park.

Nevertheless, the movement in favor of greater citizen participation over the last few years is clear. It may fairly be said to have begun with a concerted effort on the part of the public to find out whether or not it would make sense for Belmont to end Civil Service membership for Police and Fire Department employees. Indeed, a Zoom meeting organized by two Town Meeting Members, Paul Roberts and Aaron Pikcilingis, for the express purpose of educating the public and the Town Meeting Members who were to vote on the issue, was attended by over 100 people who were seriously interested in understanding how this might work. Article 10 was rejected by the 2020 Fall Town Meeting.

The override proposal on the April 2021 ballot continued the trend in citizen expression. While elected, appointed and salaried officials were convinced that it would pass, many citizens were unhappy. Citizens for A Fiscally Responsible Belmont (CFRB), a volunteer organization, stepped into the breach and, to a considerable extent, served as a focal point for residents. Although there had been similar endeavors on a number of other occasions, the leaders of this organized, targeted effort began work early enough to make an impression on the voters. CFRB provided a forum in which people could

express — sometimes more elegantly, sometimes less so — the dissatisfaction with and lack of trust in Belmont government felt by many residents including those who were not CFRB members.

This underlying dissatisfaction has not gone away. Indeed, a variety of issues have fed it. The most contentious of these occurred when the Department of Public Works (DPW) decided to replace underground fuel tanks at the DPW yard with above ground tanks. Opposition involved not only Robert Sarno, Judith Ananian Sarno and Lisa Oteri, the three DPW abutters who would have been most closely affected and who spearheaded an effort to prevent this, but numerous residents from all over Belmont.

The fight was long and bitter. Participants, regardless of where they lived in Belmont, were subjected to considerable negative feedback. In the end, Glenn Clancy, the Town Engineer, spent a year studying the issue, conducted a number of Citizen Forums to allow people to speak and, in the end, recommended below ground tanks, something that Town Meeting approved. Despite this positive ending, the negative pushback directed at those who spoke out which included questioning their honesty, increased the distrust of many in their municipal government.

Thankfully, the DPW fuel tank debate is over. Difficult as the process was, one of the good things about it was that the public was given the opportunity to speak at more than one Citizen Forum. Sometimes citizens stayed on topic and sometimes they did not. However, no matter what they had to say or how well they said it, they were given the chance to speak, to ask questions, to register their views and to make their concerns and objections known. And town government — spearheaded by the Select Board — made sure to provide a way for residents, many of whom were very upset, to be heard.

Yet another issue has arisen that has gotten residents from all over Belmont so upset that they want a venue at which they can speak out. Belmont Hill School has acquired property on the Rutledge Road side of Park Avenue and Prospect Street which it intends to use for storage areas, a maintenance depot, above ground fuel tanks, bus parking and a 150 space parking lot. The property includes a number of houses on which the school currently pays property taxes as well as some seven acres of woodlands and the significant tree canopy they provide.

The project design is being considered by Belmont's Planning Board which must give permission for it to go ahead. A discussion of the issues raised by the Belmont Hill School project, can be found in *IF I MAY: Chutzpah Personified* on the IF I MAY website at: <https://jfeinleibifimay.com/?p=1202> or on Facebook at <https://www.facebook.com/jfeinleib>.

Typically, as the Planning Board considers projects and related issues, it hears from applicants, abutters and Belmont residents. Planning Board membership changes over time and depending on the Planning Board, comments may be narrow or broad in their focus.

The current Planning Board appears to want to confine comments to specifics at least with respect to the Belmont Hill School project. A two hour time period has been allotted for the project at each of the three hearings held thus far. This has meant that the time available for public comment has been so limited that only a few abutters have been able to speak despite the fact that many people from all over Belmont have attended each session.

While it is technically appropriate for the Planning Board to focus on project design at this stage of the project, the result is that the needs of the community at large are being bypassed. People throughout Belmont are exceedingly upset. They have come to the Planning Board meetings to voice their concerns about a wide variety of issues that they feel affect the entire town and that will have lasting (negative) effects on it. In other words, this is a case where speaking out is not being easy.

Why have residents from all over Belmont come to the Planning Board? Because there is no place else for them to go; although the Select Board appoints members of the Planning Board, it stays away from Planning Board issues out of fear of politicizing them. Moreover, merely writing letters as has been done by many is not allowing residents to express their views in a way that they feel is satisfactory. Requests for a Citizens Forum where residents could speak out have been met with little or no response from any part of the town government; in fact, there are some who feel that Citizens Forums should only be used to obtain information from the population in the early stages of a project.

Whether this is the right time for a Citizens Forum or not, a population in general, and individuals in particular, get upset about a project or an issue at whatever point in the process they get upset. They do not care, nor should they, about the specifics that ordinarily govern that phase of the project or the timing of their reactions. They care about making themselves heard and they care about whether their government listens to them.

There have now been some three Planning Board sessions where the population has not been heard; numerous specific issues are scheduled to be discussed at the January 10th session. That would appear to leave little, if any, time for the many residents who wish to speak. What is badly needed is a separate meeting completely devoted to the citizens of Belmont and their views of the Belmont Hill School project. That these views may not accord with the usual Planning Board approach or that they may be hard for the Belmont Hill School to hear, is irrelevant.

Of course, the Planning Board has an obligation to meet the technical goals of its review. But in this case, the Planning Board has a broader obligation to all of Belmont to provide a venue where Belmont residents can speak their minds to the Planning Board, to all of Belmont's government and to the Belmont Hill School which is but one resident of many. After all, Belmont is our town.

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