



TOWN OF BELMONT
OFFICE OF THE SELECT BOARD
455 CONCORD AVENUE
BELMONT, MASSACHUSETTS 02478

Selectboard@belmont-ma.gov

455 CONCORD AVENUE
BELMONT, MA 02478-2573
PHONE (617) 993-2610
FAX (617) 993-2611

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Via electronic mail

Mr. Matt Genova
Transportation Improvement Program Manager
Central Transportation Planning Staff

RE: Belmont Community Path

Dear Mr. Genova:

We are writing in response to your email to Glenn Clancy dated June 16, 2020 about the Belmont Community Path. While we understand Mr. Clancy addressed many of the concerns in your email during a telephone conversation on June 18, 2020, we also wanted to provide a more comprehensive written response. In particular, we wanted to respond to parts of your email that suggest the Town has failed to be open or transparent about the planning process or to allow sufficient community engagement.

The Town of Belmont has been considering construction of a community path on or near the former Massachusetts Central Railroad right of way for more than 25 years. Since 2012, this planning has been the responsibility of three successive volunteer committees appointed by the Belmont Select Board. An initial feasibility study was completed in 2017 by an engineering consultant. A second engineering consultant is currently preparing a design that should be submitted for 25% review to MassDOT later this year. The committees and the Select Board have conducted numerous public meetings, including specific public engagement meetings, during this time. The committees and the consulting engineers have also conducted public site walks and surveys of preferences regarding the design. There has been frequent and voluminous feedback from a broad spectrum of Town residents. We have made great efforts to respect and respond to this feedback.

The Town recognizes the particular apprehension about project on the part of a number of abutters to the proposed route who live on Channing Road in Belmont. The vast majority of the comments referenced in your June 16 email came from this group. Unfortunately, there are assertions about the substance and process of the community path project that are incorrect and should not be taken at face value.

In particular, it is unfair to suggest that the Town did not engage in a cooperative planning process or provide an opportunity for all voices to be heard. Let us give a few examples of the process we actually followed. The Community Path Implementation Advisory Committee (CPIAC) hosted ten well-attended public engagement

meetings with substantive presentations by Pare Corporation, the first engineering consultant. Documents from and recordings of many of these meetings are on the CPAIC's website: <https://www.belmont-ma.gov/community-path-implementation-advisory-committee-cpiac/pages/community-path-feasibility-study>, and the overall public engagement process is outlined in the final feasibility study (available at https://www.belmont-ma.gov/sites/g/files/vyhlf2801/f/uploads/bcp_feasibility_study_-_updated.pdf). After the issuance of the final feasibility study, and hours of robust public deliberation by the CPIAC and the Select Board (including meetings with the MBTA and MassDOT and multiple opportunities for additional public comment), the Select Board voted unanimously to approve the currently proposed alignment in early 2018.

Many of the residents whose comments you referenced in your June 16 email actively participated throughout this process, but ultimately disagreed with the result (which set the alignment on the north side of the railroad alignment

rather than the south side, and therefore closer to the residences along Channing Road). A number of the comments you reference in your June 16 email appear directly or indirectly related to that decision. However, we do not believe it is appropriate to construe a carefully considered, researched, and publicly debated decision as a failure to appropriately consider or address resident concerns. Consensus is always desired but not always attainable, and we do not think it is reasonable to expect complete consensus when undertaking a significant public project.

In 2019 the Town appointed a Community Path Project Committee (CPPC) and retained Nitsch Engineering to design the first phase of the path. As part of preparing its February 2020 conceptual design report (available at https://www.belmont-ma.gov/sites/g/files/vyhlf2801/f/uploads/609204-belmont_community_path_cdr.pdf), Nitsch met a wide variety of local stakeholder groups, and conducted a well-attended site walk targeted specifically at potential abutters along Channing Road in November 2019 (which was again attended by many of the individuals whose comments you reference in your June 16 email). While the COVID-19 pandemic delayed other portions of the planned public engagement process, the CPPC hosted a well-attended virtual public information meeting with Nitsch on July 16 for Nitsch to present its draft 25% design plans, answer questions, and accept public input and feedback (see agenda here: https://www.belmont-ma.gov/sites/g/files/vyhlf2801/f/agendas/2020-07-16_community_path_project_1.pdf). In advance of this meeting and at the direction of the CPPC, Nitsch publicly posted its draft 25% design plans on a dedicated project website (<https://belmontcommunitypath.com/>), along with a survey and a free-form comment function.

Every meeting of the CPAIC and the CPPC is a public meeting subject to the Massachusetts Open Meeting Law (OML). While public comments were and are generally accepted at these meetings, sometimes they have to be limited in the interest of time at the discretion of the Chair, as recognized by the OML.¹ For this reason, the project schedule includes periodic public engagement meetings, such as the one on July 16, that are devoted to public input. Moreover, many individual CPPC members and Town staff have made time available outside of formal meetings to answer questions from interested residents.

Some residents also appear to misunderstand that certain decisions will be made at later stages of the design process, e.g., whether a specific tree will be impacted by the path. The CPPC and Town staff have repeatedly explained that many design decisions are premature for the 25% design phase and must wait until later in the design process. We have reiterated that there will be future opportunities for public comment about those decisions. Unfortunately, confusion on this point also appears to have influenced the comments you reference in your June 16 email.

The Town of Belmont is committed to an open, collaborative process as design continues on the proposed Belmont Community Path. There is broad community support for the project but there are still a number of residents with understandable concerns about it. As we have from the beginning, we will continue to work in good faith to listen to those concerns and do our best to address them.

We very much look forward to working with you on this important project, which we believe will be a great asset not only for the Town of Belmont, but for the entire Commonwealth. Please let us know if you have any questions.

Sincerely,

Russell Leino, Chair, Community Path Project Committee
Roy Epstein PhD, Chair, Select Board
Patrice Garvin, Belmont Town Administrator
Glenn Clancy, Director, Office of Community Development

¹ There were one or two occasions as the CPPC was first using the virtual meeting format when technical difficulties prevented some members of the public from entering the meeting. There was no intent to inhibit participation and these problems have not recurred.