

January 29, 2022

David Mohler
Chair, Boston Region Metropolitan Planning Organization
10 Park Plaza, Suite 2150
Boston, MA 02116

cc: Matt Genova, TIP Manager

Dear Mr. Mohler,

As Chair of the Belmont School Committee, I write regarding Belmont's transportation improvement project under your consideration, referred to as the "Community Path." The School Committee and Superintendent has endorsed this letter and supports the Belmont Community Path project.

The School Committee and School Department have worked cooperatively in the preceding years to account for this major infrastructure project, while moving forward with a major school renovation. The School Committee recognizes the needs of all families with respect to transportation modes and resources, and strives to ensure safe and accessible arrival to and dismissal from all schools while complying with related state and federal regulations. The School Committee recognizes that schools are major transit activity generators; reducing vehicular activity in the school zone improves safety.

The School Committee, School Department, and the Belmont High School Building Committee recognized and integrated planning for the anticipated 'Alexander Underpass' (bicycle-pedestrian tunnel), for its safety and access improvements to the newly designed campus. The Building Committee incorporated general pedestrian and bike improvements by reducing student parking on campus and creating additional sidewalk/shared path access routes. The campus will nearly double its student population, serving about 2,200 students.

High school students in the Global Capstone course studied commute patterns/modes to the campus in 2017 in preparation for the building project. They found that 16% of students walk or bike, and proposed ideas for increasing such transit with incentive programs (walk/bike with contracts) and increased bike racks. Their surveys revealed families' desire for better bike lanes and support for bike culture, as well. This fall, students using bicycles to travel to school exceeded expectations, evident by the increased need for storage racks. However, anecdotal reports of safety concerns continue to be shared by students, while not necessarily rising to the level of a reported crash.

In relation to walking and biking transportation, the Belmont Public Schools have taken steps to support students and families in other ways, including:

- Provided review and input to the Complete Streets prioritization plan (school routes);
- Coordinates with Belmont Police Department for School Crossing Guards;
- Collaborated with Community Development Dept. to improve safety zones with signage and infrastructure improvements in school zones;
- Supports Safe Routes to Schools (MA DOT) program at the elementary and middle school level in partnership with parent-teacher organizations;
- Supported 4 different school-based applications to MADOT/Safe Routes to Schools Infrastructure Assessment Award program; and
- Supported the MA DOT/SRTS award/project for the Wellington School.

The School Committee approved as part of the ongoing operational work of the district to: “continue to...work toward the goals of Belmont’s Climate Action Plan.” The 2007 plan found that 37% of Belmont’s carbon emissions by source are attributed to transportation. The 2018 update identified the majority of emissions by source attributable to transportation and heating. It sets a target of 50% electric vehicles by 2030, while acknowledging that non-emitting sources must be sustained to achieve target reduction levels.

School bus transportation costs continue to outpace revenue growth, however the district has supported an increase in buses, which may improve emissions overall by reducing SOV trips while providing greater access to transit for those who are unable to use non-emitting options. Like many districts, public school buses continue to rely on fees paid by student-families to offset escalating bus costs. A significant percentage of students live well within two miles of the school they attend; by law, the district is not obliged to provide transportation for a majority of students. The Committee recognizes that welcoming and safer pathways for students to bike and walk supports students who utilize this affordable transportation option, while reducing vehicular transportation demands. Neighboring peer districts Lexington, Arlington, Newton, and Melrose have integrated multi-use paths into arrival/dismissal plans and school maps.

The Committee recognizes that active transportation has a positive impact on student health. The model Wellness policy for schools provided by the USDA and CDC states that “...physical activity before, during and after the school day, are strongly correlated with positive student outcomes.” And that “...students who are physically active through active transport to and from school, recess, physical activity breaks, high-quality physical education and extracurricular activities – do better academically.” The model policy includes “active transport to and from school, such as walking or biking” as an area of wellness to promote. Belmont currently enacts several of the suggested activities outlined in the model.

The Community Path would provide free and accessible recreation space, and a safer active transit solution for students and families, as well as visiting youth. Peer districts have utilized paths for Wellness and physical education programs, as well as team-athletic training.

Finally, although the School Committee has not thus far deemed it necessary to take a position on any particular segments of the planned route, it has consistently identified the Alexander Underpass as a critical safety improvement for students and families.

Sincerely,

Amy Checkoway
Chair, Belmont School Committee