

Belmont Meeting

Louise Vest

In late August, a presentation of a draft master plan for development at the Belmont Conference Center was given at Belmont by Matthew D'Amico of Design Collective, Inc, a Baltimore architectural and design firm.

The firm was hired by the HCCEF (Howard Community College Education Foundation) to design plans for new construction at Belmont, a 1738 estate in ElkrIDGE, which HCCEF recently purchased. Belmont has been used as a conference center for the last 40 years,

To complement the presentation, D'Amico brought two overview slides of the site that included views of current and proposed buildings and also a proposed access road onto the Belmont property from Landing

Road, which would traverse state park property.

HCCEF proposes:

1. Building an inn that would add more rooms to the center for overnight conferences;
2. Building a hospitality management and culinary arts building, with classrooms and kitchens, near the stone barn;
3. Building an addition on the carriage house;
4. Renovating the stone barn to use as conference space and administrative offices;
5. Building a conservatory center for music and cultural events for the college and community to be used year 'round;
6. Building a wellness center where holistic medicine will be practiced;
7. Building an access road from Landing Road onto Belmont

property;

8. Building an ecology "green center" for students.

Regarding the development and HCC's goals, D' Amico said that HCC wants to:

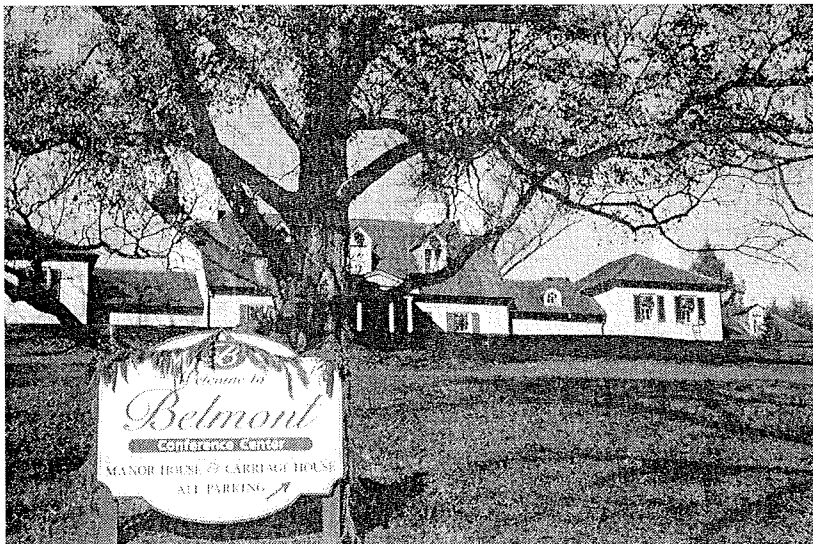
1. Maintain the view shed at Belmont;
2. Operate as a conference center;
3. Provide opportunities to learn while helping to operate the conference center.

After the presentation, members of the audience had more than a few questions for D'Amico, some of which he could answer, others he could not.

At that time, he did not know how much traffic would be using the Landing Road entrance, how many classes would be held at Belmont, how many students would be attending classes there, the proposed square footage for each new building and additions, and how many trees would have to be cut down for the new access road.

He did say he thought the new conservatory wouldn't be built for 8-10 years and that its seating capacity would be from 150 to 200 people. He didn't think they would be holding events there too frequently. He said the college has no plans for a public tavern on Belmont and that in the plans for

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discussion that night, the college wasn't looking at the Dobbin property.

After basic questions were asked, it was apparent that D'Amico was doing his best to answer with the information he had. Though he received a round of applause from the audience for his tenacity and patience, the lack of information and the nebulous quality of what was provided made the audience more wary.

Learning Swerve

With no one front and center representing HCCEF or the college at the meeting, the audience continued to direct their comments to D'Amico about Belmont's future.

One Belmont Woods Road resident voiced her concerns about taxpayers having to pay for the conference center's failure to stay in the black (only a recent occurrence), in addition to taxpayers' on-going subsidizing of the college itself.

Piggy-backing on that, someone else in the audience pointed out that non-profits' commercial offerings are not supposed to take livelihoods away from same-service businesses in the community and added that the college toggles back and forth between being a non-profit and a for-profit wannabe, whichever proves more advantageous at the time.

"It seems educators are trying to do us in," said another attendee, who added that Belmont neighbors and fans were at first supportive when they heard the col-

lege was buying Belmont, but said that those feelings disintegrated when the college was not forthcoming with their plans. (HCCEF has since expressed an interest in looking at plans from the community.)

Some audience members had ideas about improving the college's plans, ideas that would minimize the impact of the proposed changes to Belmont. They included better placement of parking lots, the culinary center and the inn.

(The community *had* previously OK'd the building of more overnight rooms on the property to help with the financial support the conference center.)

One man attending the meeting spoke of the positives of using underground buildings on the site to maintain more of the aesthetics of the property. He also noted that the very dark sky over Belmont, an anomaly within the light polluted surrounding skies, and he suggested using Belmont for astronomy studies. Another man said the barn's silo would be a good site for those studies.

A senior citizen suggested that if the college just sold Belmont to "some fat cat" the problem would be solved. He added that in this real estate market it's a steal for someone with money who wanted to be located near the B/W corridor.

In response, D'Amico said that if someone else bought Belmont they might bring in more development, but he did not add any qualifier to that statement about the existence of the preservation easement that is supposed to limit development.

I Know It When I See It

Belmont's intrinsic beauty seemed to be recognized by everyone, but views diverged when it came to the property's preservation.

Toward the end of the meeting, one audience member spoke about Belmont's beauty, and its importance not only for the county, but for Maryland. He ticked off names of other county historical estates that have been degraded by what was built around them. One he cited was Waverly Mansion, now out of context as it is closely surrounded by noisy roads and developments.

Questions erupted in the audience several times about the proposed new road, which would punch a hole in the cocoon that is Belmont.

"If you build it, they will come," one man said.

Others commented:

"These are wonderful plans for a college, for somewhere else," and "It will be HCC east."

"I've worked with non-profits for 40 years and they can be more cut-throat than businesses," said Alan Ullberg, who attended the meeting. Ullberg is the former Smithsonian lawyer who wrote the Belmont preservation easement, when the property was owned by that institution.

He continued, saying that non-profits aren't always after money, but they are focused on their goal, whatever that is.

"The college is a college, so they want more college," he said.

Another meeting regarding Belmont was proposed for some time in October. ❖