

Comparing The Town's Analytical Approach to Our Own

The Planning Board and Office of Planning & Building (OPB) have based their financial estimates on three key factors: first, OPB’s assumptions regarding unit mixes (44% studios, 44% one-bedroom units, and 12% two-bedroom units); second, estimates for school aged children (SACs) living in the various unit sizes based on studies conducted by Newton and Newburyport; and, third, an estimate of \$13,756 in incremental costs per each additional child attending school, as contained in the town’s August 2025 fiscal impact analysis.

In its recent review of fiscal impacts of the Belmont Center Overlay District, the Warrant Committee (WC) essentially adopted OPB’s assumptions about the mix of apartments likely to be built under the overlay and the numbers of school age children who will reside in those apartments. At the same time, they performed sensitivity analyses concerning both factors to determine the fiscal impacts should the actual mix or SAC measures differ from the town's estimates. Also, the Committee determined that RKG's estimate for incremental costs per student did not fully account for all variable costs and increased it to \$14,728 per child based on their own analysis of the FY2025 budget.

We believe that the town's estimates are based on insufficient data, given the long time horizon and changing market conditions over which the rezoning will drive development. In performing our own analysis, we conducted more extensive research into the unit mix and school aged children (SAC) variables. Also, like the Warrant Committee, we examined the school budget and identified additional costs that could be expected to increase with new students. Finally, we updated those per child costs to reflect the FY2026 budget.

The following table compares our analytical approach to the approach taken by the Planning Board and OPB in developing their Belmont Center Overlay proposal, as well as the revised estimates developed by the Warrant Committee.

Input Factor	Planning Board & OPB Estimates and Warrant Committee Analysis Findings	Belmont Better Zoning Analysis Findings
Apartment Mix	<p>Planning Board/OPB: The Planning Board and OPB forecast a likely apartment mix of 44% Studio Apartments, 44% 1-Bedroom Apartments, and 12% 2-Bedroom Apartments. This mix would result in more than 510 total units.¹</p> <p>Warrant Committee: Using the Planning Board/OPB estimates as a base, the WC performed a sensitivity analysis of the 44%-44%-12% apartment mix to measure the impact that a different mix might have</p>	<p>To develop a more extensive data set for estimating a likely apartment mix, we collected data on 43 developments located in Belmont and other neighboring and comparable towns, all of which were either built within the last 20 years or are in advanced planning stages. The other towns included Arlington, Braintree, Lexington, Melrose, Newton, Watertown, and Wellesley.</p>

¹ The exact number of units varies somewhat depending on what document one looks at.

Input Factor	Planning Board & OPB Estimates and Warrant Committee Analysis Findings	Belmont Better Zoning Analysis Findings
	<p>on the number of school age children living in new Belmont Center developments.</p> <p>Specifically, they evaluated the potential impact of (1) doubling the share of 2-bedroom units and (2) also adding 3-bedroom apartments equal to 7% of the total units.</p>	<p>Calculating weighted averages of the unit mixes in these developments and applying these averages to a full buildout in Belmont Center, we estimate 408 apartments could be built under the overlay, of which 7% would be studios, 46% one-bedroom units, 40% two-bedroom units, and 7% three-bedroom units.</p>
<p>Additional School Aged Children</p>	<p>Planning Board/OPB: SAC ratios (number of children per unit of a specified size) were estimated based on studies conducted by Newton and Newburyport, resulting in a total of 54 additional school-aged children and an average SAC ratio of 0.10 per unit.</p> <p>Warrant Committee: The WC conducted a similar sensitivity analysis of the OPB SAC ratios by (1) applying a 15% increase to the ratios reflecting the difference between Newton's average SAC ratio (0.263) and the ratios originally calculated by RKG (0.30), and (2) using broader state multi-town average SACs. Based on these adjustments, plus the apartment mix analysis above, the resulting totals for school age children ranged from a low of 44 to a high of 92. The low-end estimate is highly sensitive to a unit mix heavily skewed towards studios and 1-BR, and uses a SAC ratio from a mix of towns not specified in the WC report.</p>	<p>Using available data from several surrounding communities (Arlington, Lexington, Newton, Watertown, and Wellesley), plus the apartment mix described above, we developed weighted averages of school-aged children by unit size, with separate estimates for market rate and affordable units. Combining these averages with the above unit mix percentages yielded counts of 118 new school-aged children across all 408 units, an average SAC ratio of 0.29.</p> <p>As a reference point, RKG estimated a SAC ratio of 0.3 for Belmont in their October 2024 fiscal impact analysis.</p>
<p>Incremental Cost per School Aged Child</p>	<p>Planning Board/OPB: Based on an RKG analysis of variable costs in the FY2025 school budget, the Planning Board and OPB posited a per student cost of \$13,756. Subsequent efforts to get a more granular breakdown of cost elements were not successful.</p> <p>Warrant Committee: In its analysis of the FY2025 budget, the Warrant Committee found the RKG estimate to be too low and developed an updated estimate of \$14,728.</p>	<p>Like the Warrant Committee, we found the RKG estimate of incremental costs per additional student to be too low. Also, given the significant increase in the school budget from FY2025 to FY2026, we decided that the estimate needed to be updated to reflect the latter budget. Our resulting estimate is \$15,489.</p>