



# Bellevue Planning Commission

September 27, 2023

## PLANNING COMMISSION AGENDA ITEM

### SUBJECT

BelRed Look Forward: Overview of proposed policy updates related to open space and natural systems in the BelRed Subarea Plan.

### STAFF CONTACTS

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### POLICY ISSUES

As part of Bellevue's Comprehensive Plan Periodic Update, the City is updating policies in the BelRed Subarea Plan. This will allow the City to continue to plan for significant growth in BelRed and strengthen implementation strategies for achieving the BelRed vision. New state legislation, regional plans and policies, community feedback, and findings from recent planning efforts and analyses form the basis of recommended policy updates. This memo focuses on updates to policy areas related to Open Space and Natural Systems that can be found within the following BelRed Subarea Plan sections (see Attachment A):

- Environment
- Parks and Open Space
- Urban Design
- Implementation

### DIRECTION NEEDED FROM THE PLANNING COMMISSION

**ACTION**



**DIRECTION**



**INFORMATION ONLY**



Confirm direction for updating key policy areas related to Open Space and Natural Systems in the BelRed Subarea Plan and areas to focus on during future community engagement. Identify any missing policy areas.

## **BACKGROUND**

### *History*

The BelRed subarea, spanning 964 acres, covers an area twice the size of Downtown making it Bellevue's largest mixed use neighborhood area. The subarea has undergone several transformations over the last couple of centuries changing from dense forest into farmland at the turn of the 20th century, and then transforming into a light industrial area at the time of Bellevue's incorporation in mid-century. With adoption of the BelRed Subarea Plan and Land Use Code in 2009, along with investment in light rail, BelRed began its most recent transformation into a mixed-use, pedestrian friendly, transit-oriented area.

Since 2009, over 2,100 housing units and 2.2 million square feet of non-residential space have been developed, and another 3,100 housing units and 1.3 million square feet of office development are in the pipeline indicating that BelRed is on track to meeting the 5,000 housing unit and 10,000 job growth projected for the subarea by 2030.

### *Purpose*

The BelRed Look Forward was initiated as part of the Comprehensive Plan Periodic Update in 2022 to incorporate new information into the subarea plan, strengthen implementation strategies for achieving the vision, and to increase capacity for development to meet new citywide housing and job targets.

### *Process*

Similar to the series of Planning Commission meetings where staff brought forward proposed policy moves for the Wilburton Vision Implementation and key policy update areas for the Comprehensive Plan Periodic Update, staff will be providing commissioners with an overview of proposed update areas of moves for the BelRed Subarea Plan over a series of three meetings in the fall of 2023. Each meeting will focus on a different theme, namely:

- **September 27:** Open Space and Natural Systems
- **October 25:** Cultural and Community Connections
- **December 13:** Land Use and Urban Form

For each theme, staff will summarize the key policy update areas and review the following:

- **Aspirations** articulated in the BelRed Vision and the desired results or outcomes of implementation;
- **Strengths and weaknesses** of implementation strategies based on the existing context and conditions in the BelRed subarea along with **potential threats or challenges**;
- **Opportunities** for strengthening policy to improve implementation strategies and mitigate unintended consequences or potential threats.

Opportunities identified stem from new state legislation, regional plans and policies, community feedback, and findings from recent planning efforts and analyses. They inform key policy moves proposed for the update listed below.

### **KEY POLICY UPDATE AREAS**

The key policy update areas related to Open Space and Natural Systems affecting policies in the Environment, Parks and Open Space, Urban Design and Implementation sections of the BelRed Subarea Plan include:

- Parks and open space expansion
- Surface and stormwater planning
- Climate change resilience
- Holistic and high performance implementation

### *Aspirations in the BelRed Vision*

Below are elements of the BelRed Vision that describe the City's aspirations related to Open Space and Natural Systems as well as the desired results or outcomes of implementation:

**A comprehensive, connected parks and open space system:** BelRed will have a park system that serves residents, employees, and visitors of the area, and provides recreation and open space benefits for residents from surrounding neighborhoods as well. System components will include trails along stream corridors, urban and natural open space areas, community facilities, community and neighborhood parks, and cultural/arts features.

**Environmental improvements:** Redevelopment of the corridor will provide opportunities for major environmental enhancements, including improving riparian corridors, adding trees and green spaces, and providing a more environmentally sensitive approach to managing storm water and other natural resources.

**Sustainability:** New neighborhoods, buildings, streetscapes, parks and open space systems, environmental enhancements, and transportation facilities will also be planned, designed and developed using state-of-the-art techniques to enhance the natural and built environment and create a more livable community.

### *Strengths*

The BelRed subarea itself, along with subarea plans and policies, have many strengths related to open space and natural systems. Physically, a strong framework for expanding and improving open space and natural systems exists along BelRed's streams and wetlands across the subarea. The BelRed Park, Trail and Open Space System Plan identifies several key opportunities for investment in different sizes and types of parks across the subarea. Since 2009, BelRed's FAR Amenity Incentive System has delivered 100 affordable housing units and 8.6 million dollars for affordable housing as well as 8.5 million dollars for park and stream improvements. "Green

Streets,” defined in BelRed’s Streetscape Plan and Land Use Code provide guidelines and standards for natural drainage practices and expansion of tree canopy. The BelRed Subarea Plan’s nodal development pattern around light rail promotes sustainability by enabling efficient use of land and energy and thereby minimizing the environmental impact of new development.

### *Weaknesses*

Despite these strengths, the BelRed subarea began with a deficit of pervious surface, tree canopy and park and open space, and improvements have been slow to materialize. FAR Amenity Incentive System fees in lieu have not kept pace with rising land values making property acquisition challenging using this mechanism. The city will need to explore other funding sources to achieve the vision for a comprehensive, connected parks and open space system. Uncertainty around the time and effort to daylight streams and restore riparian habitat has made improvements challenging without additional partnership and support. Some development regulations have also inadvertently limited opportunities for use of natural drainage practices on-site. BelRed's high water table has also posed challenges to development. Lastly, a coordinated strategy for realizing a complete and connected surface and stormwater system across the subarea has not been developed resulting in piecemeal implementation.

### *Threats*

Climate change could exacerbate some of these weaknesses by increasing the frequency and intensity of storm events, thereby increasing demand placed on storm and surface water systems. Climate change could also lead to an increase in the frequency and intensity of high heat events leading to higher stream temperatures impairing habitat for fish and other aquatic life and longer and more intense periods of drought impairing vegetation and tree canopy. The longer it takes to implement strategies, the more costly they can become.

### *Opportunities*

Fortunately, many opportunities exist for holistic, high performing strategies that build greater resilience to climate change and improve the function of natural systems as identified in the Characterization of Future Conditions Technical Memo for the City’s forthcoming Watershed Management Plan and the City’s Climate Vulnerability Assessment. The Greater Kelsey Creek Watershed Assessment Report also identifies key priorities and opportunities for investment in surface water projects and programs to improve stream health.

With redevelopment, opportunities will exist for installing up-to-date stormwater retention and treatment facilities as well as for decreasing impervious surface and expanding tree canopy. Studying the feasibility of a distributed regional stormwater facility could expand opportunities for more effective natural drainage practices and increase flexibility and options for new development. A key component of a distributed facility could be leveraging transportation investments. Green and pedestrian streets, as described in the BelRed Streetscape Plan, could form the basis of a distributed stormwater management system and provide a framework for

improving access to natural areas. Coupled with policies encouraging buildings to produce a sense of enclosure in "outdoor rooms," leveraging transportation investments could also support the development of usable public open space and the creation of a system of linear parks and recreational trails. Policies encouraging the use of biophilic design could also mitigate the heat island effect and support cooler environments.

To achieve all the desired open space and natural system outcomes for BelRed, incentives as well as partnerships and investment are needed. Updating policies calling for a recalibration and redesign of BelRed's FAR Amenity Incentive System could help tailor amenities and direct them toward areas where they could provide the greatest benefit. Recommendations in the City's 2021-2025 Environmental Stewardship Plan also call for strengthening development incentives to encourage green building.

### *Community Feedback*

Expanding tree canopy, especially in neighborhoods with low canopy levels, has had broad community support throughout the Comprehensive Plan Periodic Update process, as has upholding Bellevue's motto of being a "City in a Park." As mentioned at last week's Commission meeting, a key take-away from a Utilities department survey in 2021 was that Bellevue residents value the city's streams, lakes and wetlands primarily for the role they play in a healthy ecosystem over their use for recreational purposes or connection to history or spiritual practices. In addition, community engagement around the Comprehensive Plan has shown consistent support for measures that maintain Bellevue's park-like setting and enhance the environment.

In the Vision Survey (Phase 1), 65 percent of Bellevue community members said parks and green space were one of the things that they value and want future generations to enjoy, the most common response. Many developers also recognize the benefits of environmentally sustainable design, which can increase the value of their projects and lower infrastructure costs. Yet, some regulations, while seemingly simple, can be complicated and result in development challenges. Policies to evaluate barriers to sustainable design, provide flexibility where possible, and target improvements where they will have the greatest impact are also proposed.

### *Summary of Key Policy Moves*

Proposed key policy moves related to Open Space and Natural Systems affecting policies in the Environment, Parks and Open Space, Urban Design and Implementation sections of the BelRed Subarea Plan are as follows:

- Exploring additional mechanisms for funding acquisition of land for parks and open space.

- Studying development of regional surface and stormwater facilities that leverages multiple public and private investments in transportation, parks and open space facilities.
- Contextualizing the Floor Area Ratio (FAR) amenity incentive system to direct amenities where they will have the greatest impact and tying changes in fees in lieu to changes in land values.
- Explore opportunities to leverage right-of-way and other investments to create linear parks, plazas and recreational trails, and to expand access to natural areas.
- Building resilience to climate change through incentives for green building and biophilic design.
- Evaluating barriers to sustainable design, providing flexibility for other requirements where possible, and targeting solutions that achieve a high level of performance for all objectives.

## **ATTACHMENTS**

- A. BelRed Subarea Plan