

**CITY COUNCIL STUDY SESSION**

Safe Parking Program for Homelessness Response

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**DIRECTION NEEDED FROM COUNCIL****DIRECTION**

Staff is seeking direction to return with a framework for implementation of a pilot safe parking program.

**RECOMMENDATION**

Direct staff to develop a detailed implementation plan, legal analysis, cost estimate, and budget proposal to support a safe parking pilot program, or an alternate program defined by the Council.

**BACKGROUND & ANALYSIS**

The City is dedicated to making homelessness rare, brief, and one time when it occurs. Bellevue currently supports a range of services and facilities to address the needs of community members experiencing homelessness and housing instability. The City Council adopted a 2021-23 Council Priority to “explore a safe parking program for homelessness response” (#17). Community members living in vehicles represent a significant portion of unhoused individuals in Bellevue and on the Eastside and require specialized services to address their needs and move towards stable housing.

This report responds directly to Council Priority #17. The analysis and recommendations are based on staff input, consultant research (see Attachment A), and other sources. These include a 2019 report by a graduate student with the University of Washington Livable City Year initiative, who worked with Bellevue staff to develop research and guidance for successfully hosting safe parking programs.

Safe parking programs provide vehicle residents with a place to park and rest, access to sanitary facilities, and connection to social services and other needed resources. Numerous communities on the Eastside, around the state, and across the country, have established successful safe parking programs. It should be noted that access to safe parking is not intended to be a solution for homelessness; it is an important part of an expansive network of services and safety nets to help the most vulnerable in our community and support their path to stable housing, which in turn, benefits our entire community.

The 2020 County-wide Point in Time (PIT) Count identified 11,751 individuals experiencing homelessness in King County, including approximately 2,750 who were staying in vehicles. Within the East King County Subregion, the 2020 PIT counted approximately 446 homeless individuals living unsheltered, including 300 vehicle residents. A limited count within Bellevue conducted by Police and Parks & Community Services staff in December 2021 found 83 vehicles that appeared to be lived in. Single-night counts routinely undercount people experiencing homelessness, indicating that the actual number of vehicle residents (and all individuals experiencing homelessness) on the Eastside is greater.

Community members staying in vehicles (including cars, RVs, and box trucks), which may or may not be operational, typically park on the street, in commercial parking lots, or in City parks. The City's

Homelessness Outreach staff actively seeks to contact vehicle residents, as well as other unhoused residents, and helps them address a range of needs in the interest of promoting health and safety and ultimately finding stable housing. Due to the specialized needs of people living in their vehicles and potential impacts from vehicle encampments, the entire community is best served by providing safe, accessible locations for vehicle residences which are thoughtfully managed and supplemented by connections to service providers.

### **Regulatory Background**

The City currently does not regulate safe parking facilities under its land use code. Bellevue City Code (BCC) 10.06.110 makes it a misdemeanor crime to unlawfully camp on nonresidential public property between sunset and sunrise, except at places set aside by the city manager for such purposes, or by permit issued by the city manager or his or her designee, unless there is no available overnight shelter. This limitation applies to camping on properties that the City of Bellevue or other government agency owns or in which they have other property interests (e.g., easements), but not to property owned by private persons/entities or religious organizations.

Revised Code of Washington (RCW) 35A.21.360 authorizes religious organizations to host vehicle resident safe parking on property owned or controlled by the religious organization. That law also limits the extent to which the City can regulate safe parking facilities hosted by religious organizations. Currently, the City does not regulate these facilities. If the City were to choose to begin regulating them, the City would need to follow the limits in state law. Among other limits, the law states that cities may not impose conditions other than those necessary to protect public health and safety, and that do not substantially burden the decisions or actions of religious organizations. State law allows cities to require religious organizations to enter into MOUs with cities to protect public health and safety and requires a public meeting prior to opening a facility. A religious organization may use a “managing agency”, as defined in state law, to operate its safe parking facilities.

The City currently places time limits for parking on City streets. BCC 11.23.020 prohibits parking or re-parking of a vehicle on either side of a public street within the same block for a period exceeding 24 consecutive hours. A vehicle shall be deemed to be parked in violation of this code unless the vehicle is moved to a different block every 24 hours.

### **Program Options**

By providing accommodations for people in crisis safe parking programs have been shown to decrease the number of police calls due to illegal parking, enhance safety and well-being for vehicle residents, and assist hosts with best practices, all of which can benefit the entire community. Development of a safe parking program in Bellevue should include discussions regarding issues such as site management, case management, hours of operation, stay requirements (e.g., code of conduct), enforcement needs, City contribution, and duration of program. A pilot program to expand opportunities for safe parking lots to public or non-religious private properties, with regular scheduled evaluation, as many other cities have done, provides the ability to evaluate the benefits and challenges of any program and make any necessary improvements. Extensive and ongoing engagement with the community and those with lived experience, expert site management and collaboration with public safety, partnerships with community service providers, clear site requirements, and sustained funding

sources are important to the success of any safe parking program. Additional detail about each of the options below can be found in Attachment A.

### Operational Model

Safe parking programs typically follow one of three operational models: (1) centralized, with one contracted service provider/site management across multiple sites; (2) privatized, with each site supporting its own operations; or (3) municipally staffed programs, with dedicated city staff to manage safe parking sites and provide services. Staff recommends that the City pursue the centralized model for coordinated site management for City or private properties, with a similar option for religious properties who choose to use this model. This would entail the City contracting with a single service provider for management of all sites (regardless of site ownership or location). This approach limits redundant costs for individual organizations, creates consistency of operations across safe parking sites, coordinates engagement with service providers in the community, provides a single point of contact for vehicle residents needing safe parking and for other community members, and enhances the ability for the City to monitor program effectiveness. The service provider could also provide case management for individuals staying at designated safe parking sites in a manner that is tailored to the particular needs and issues of vehicle residents. Costs for this service can be significant, depending on the number of sites (initial estimates and input from other jurisdictions indicate approximately \$35,000 - \$55,000 per month).

### Locations

#### 1. *Religious Organization Properties*

As discussed above, religious organizations are currently allowed by state law to provide vehicle resident safe parking services to unhoused residents on property they own or control. No code changes are needed to continue to allow such operations. The City may choose to amend the City Code to add site standards for safe parking only as appropriate to protect public health and safety, consistent with state law. In order to support and encourage religious organizations to successfully host safe parking, the City could develop a start-up guide and additional informational resources. The City could also offer to provide site management services via the City's contracted provider, so that the religious community can focus on hosting duties. The host organization has the ability to identify additional features of the safe parking operation, including vehicle types, parking hours, screening requirements, and types of individuals hosted (women, families with children, single adults, people with pets, etc.), consistent with state law.

#### 2. *City-owned property pilot*

Staff recommends that the City host a limited-term pilot safe parking facility on City-owned property. Implementation of the pilot program would not require a code change. The City Manager has the authority to authorize this under current City Code, and can require the safety, security, and health measures necessary to support success. In order to provide a safe alternative for the most vulnerable vehicle residents, a City-hosted pilot should have a low barrier to entry for participants, including considering allowing for large vehicles such as RVs, and/or allowing for vehicles not in operational condition. Establishing a one-year pilot program would allow for ongoing evaluation of successes and impacts and enable the City to make an informed decision about whether to continue the program and what modifications should be

made. The pilot program would identify and monitor key performance indicators to track program success.

3. *Non-residential properties*

The City currently does not regulate this use on private properties under its land use code. The Council could choose to add regulations to allow for non-profit organizations or commercial properties who wish to host safe parking facilities, along with City-provided and funded support services. Doing so could further expand capacity for such programs in the City. Sites and hosts would need to meet a specific set of requirements to support the success of the facility and promote public health and safety. The City could consider regulations consistent with best practices for safe parking including location, size, on-site sanitary facilities, access to storage, or other matters.

4. *On-street safe parking zones*

Staff does not recommend designating on-street safe parking zones. Challenges for sanctioned on-street zones include street maintenance, sanitation, potential impacts to adjacent properties, ability to manage the site, hours of operation, or number of guests, and difficulty in providing consistent case management. Potential locations (on non-residential streets only) would be very challenging to identify, and community support would likely be difficult to obtain. Such a program would require amendments to the parking ordinance due to the current time limits set for parking on City streets and to establish approved locations.

### **Next Steps**

Successful program development and implementation will require input from people with lived experience, community outreach, continued City support, and frequent assessment. If directed to take further action, staff will develop a budget proposal to be considered in the 2023-24 budget, as well as implementation program including contracting needs, operational regulations, program goals and metrics, any required SEPA evaluation, legal review and implications, and assessment of current work plans and implementation timelines, and return to the Council for further authorization as needed. The priorities for the pilot program would include outreach to religious organizations regarding safe parking and establishing a one-year pilot on City property with contracted site and case management.

## **POLICY & FISCAL IMPACTS**

### **Policy Impact**

This program would implement Council Priority #17, “explore a safe parking program for homelessness response.” Further, it is consistent with the Comprehensive Plan policies to support an intentional local community response to homelessness with supportive services provided to families, youth, and single adults (HS-18).

### **Fiscal Impact**

Future implementation of a safe parking pilot program with City contracted site management services and/or pilot safe parking lot(s) hosted on City-owned property will require funding. If directed to proceed with a pilot program, based on the results of additional analysis described above, funding would need to be added to the 23-24 budget.

## **OPTIONS**

1. Direct staff to develop a detailed implementation plan, legal analysis, cost estimate, and budget proposal to support a safe parking pilot program, or an alternate program defined by the Council.
2. Provide alternative direction to staff.

## **ATTACHMENTS**

- A. Alternatives for Vehicle Residency and Safe Parking Memo

## **AVAILABLE IN COUNCIL LIBRARY**

N/A