

**Bellevue Arts Commission
Special Meeting Minutes**

July 9, 2025
4:30 p.m.

Bellevue City Hall
1E-113 and Virtual

Commissioners Present:	Chairperson Aldredge, Commissioners Bhargava, Chen, Hazra, Martínez
Commissioners Remote:	None
Commissioners Absent:	Commissioner Enomoto
Staff Present:	Manette Stamm, Lorie Hoffman, Jesse Canedo, Corbin Hart, Community Development; Yuka Shimizu, Allen Nakamoto, Japan Fair; Sheli Hadari, Artma Popup
Others Present:	Councilmember Sumadiwiry
Recording Secretary:	Gerry Lindsay

I. Call To Order

The meeting was called to order at 4:30 p.m. by Chair Aldredge, who presided. All Commissioners were present with the exception of Commissioner Enomoto.

2. Approval of Agenda and Minutes

A. Approval of Agenda

Motion to approve the agenda was made by Commissioner Chen. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Bhargava and the motion carried unanimously.

B. Approval of Minutes

Motion to approve the June 4, 2025, minutes as submitted was made by Commissioner Bhargava. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Martínez and the motion carried without dissent; Chair Aldredge abstained from voting.

3. Oral Communications

Alex Tsimerman began with a Nazi salute and called the Commissioners dirty Nazi pigs. Tsimerman claimed that the Commission engages in hate, bias, and harassment every time speakers must face the Commission and not the audience. Mayor Robinson and other Councilmembers were accused of suppressing free speech and compared their actions to those of totalitarian regimes. It was noted that multiple trespass notices had been received, but without a fair appeal, which is criminal. Long-standing grievances were voiced, and the city government was characterized as oppressive.

4. Action, Discussion and Information Items

A. Elections

Commissioner Bhargava self-nominated to serve as Chair.

Commissioner Chen nominated Chair Aldredge to serve as Chair.

Commissioners Bhargava and Hazra voted for Commissioner Bhargava.

Chair Aldredge and Commissioners Chen and Martínez voted for Chair Aldredge.

By majority vote, Chair Aldredge was voted to continue serving as Chair.

Commissioner Chen nominated Commissioner Enomoto to serve as Vice Chair.

Commissioner Martínez nominated Commissioner Bhargava to serve as Vice Chair.

Chair Aldredge and Commissioners Hazra and Qiong voted for Commissioner Enomoto, and by majority vote was elected to continue serving as Vice Chair.

B. Artwork Donation

Arts Community Manager Lorie Hoffman explained that a Bellevue resident recently approached staff with an offer to donate *American Dog* by artist Dale Rogers. The material of the work is Corten steel. The piece stands approximately 4.5 feet tall and is 6 feet in length. The artwork has low maintenance requirements and was fully paid for by private donors. The donors, who are relocating, cannot take the sculpture with them and have offered it to the city.

Lorie Hoffman said the Parks Department has expressed enthusiasm about the donation and is considering installation at one of the city's off-leash dog parks. The department has also agreed to manage the storage and installation logistics, thereby minimizing the burden on the city's resources. It was confirmed that the artwork is in good condition, has a lifespan exceeding ten years, and meets the standards required for acceptance into the public collection. It was also emphasized that the artist is confirmed and known; the city avoids accepting works from unknown or self-donating artists to prevent devaluation.

The staff recommended accepting the work into the city's public art collection.

Chair Aldredge warned that Corten steel stains surfaces, such as concrete, and recommended that installation occur over gravel or an appropriate ground cover to prevent unsightly rust marks. Corten steel requires minimal maintenance, which is a significant benefit. If the base has given it proper consideration, the donation of the work should be accepted.

A motion to accept the donation of *American Dog* was made by Commissioner Bhargava. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Hazra, and the motion carried unanimously.

C. Economic Development Plan Update

Jesse Canedo, Chief Economic Development Officer, explained that the Economic Development Plan is updated approximately every five years. The current plan, adopted in 2020, focused on economic diversification and included supporting the BelRed Arts District, reinvigorating the Old Bellevue Merchants Association, and collaborating with Visit Bellevue on initiatives such as the Bellhop. Those efforts were intended to expand job and economic opportunities beyond the city's well-established technology sector. The focus of the updated plan centers on meeting the city's job growth targets as outlined in the Comprehensive Plan, specifically aiming to add 70,000 new jobs by 2044. Achieving this goal will require broad community involvement to ensure that Bellevue remains an attractive place to live, work, and visit. The arts play a vital role in maintaining the city's appeal.

Business Development Manager Corbin Hart explained that the guiding principles were adopted in December 2024. They are intended to shape the strategic direction of the plan rather than serve as specific strategies. Since that time, staff have conducted detailed research and outreach, engaging with business owners, residents, tourists, nonprofit representatives, and district-based organizations. As of July 9, the team has transitioned into developing the strategic framework, the strategies and the actual actions for the plan update. The final plan adoption is scheduled for December 2025.

The guiding principles fall into several thematic categories, including ensuring a diversified and resilient economy; emphasizing small business and entrepreneurship, including anti-displacement strategies; fostering strong partnerships and implementation tools; supporting both the technology-driven and traditional arts-based creative economy; advancing tourism; and enhancing public spaces. Public art is often a defining characteristic used to highlight and distinguish specific districts.

Regarding community engagement, Corbin Hart explained that the process has been intentional and integrated into existing city programs, such as technical assistance and business retention efforts. The focused engagement was conducted through a series of topic-based focus groups. The creative economy was given dedicated attention, and input was gathered from arts nonprofits, small arts businesses, and larger cultural organizations. There was some overlap between the creative economy and tourism categories. A unique focus has been placed on Eastgate due to its high commercial office vacancy rate, which is currently around 40 percent.

A 2023 business survey revealed that 70 percent of businesses in the creative sector considered Bellevue a better location for doing business compared to other cities. While that was a strong result, it was lower than the results from other industries, prompting a deeper examination of how to better support the arts and culture sector.

The core themes from the creative economy focus groups emphasized the need for sustained investment in arts and culture, recognizing the benefits not only to residents and tourists but also to employers and employees. A vibrant arts scene has been identified as a critical factor in attracting and retaining talent. Small arts organizations and businesses were found to share similar needs with broader small businesses in terms of concerns over displacement, access to technical assistance, and financing challenges.

Corbin Hart said the 2025 plan identifies several peer cities for the purpose of comparing data. The list includes Plano, Texas and Irvine, California, and replaces Santa Monica, California and Boulder, Colorado. The new cities were selected for their greater relevance to Bellevue's economic context.

The city's efforts seek to track both the traditional creative economy and the technology-driven segments. Bellevue is home to numerous game developers who are considered part of the creative sector, but they have different needs than traditional artists. Although Bellevue does not exhibit the widest gap between traditional and tech-based creative employment, it does have one of the highest overall employment counts in the sector, which is impressive.

Corbin Hart said staff are currently finalizing the strategic framework of the plan. The drafting of specific strategies will occur in the third and fourth quarters of 2025, and adoption of the final plan is expected by the end of the year.

A member of the audience asked whether comparisons had been made with Seattle. Corbin Hart confirmed that such comparisons had been made. The data analysis includes peer cities as well as the Seattle metropolitan statistical area for comparison. The comparisons are especially relevant in areas such as labor flows and commuting patterns. Bellevue is considered part of a larger regional economy, and its factors are considered as part of the analysis.

Chair Aldredge asked if the plan includes recommendations to maintain a certain number of older buildings, noting that older buildings in Seattle have historically provided low-rent spaces that support the incubation of artistic talent. Constructing new buildings typically results in higher costs. Often, the most environmentally friendly alternative is preservation and reuse. Jesse Canedo confirmed that the city is engaged in historic preservation work, specifically in developing code language. Bellevue has decided to become an urbanizing community, and this shift translates into older structures having to make way for higher-intensity usage, which is recognized as causing significant displacement, particularly impacting artists and sole proprietors.

Corbin Hart explained that the city has implemented several ongoing programs, including business walks and active relationship-building with small businesses. The efforts are designed to help businesses relocate within Bellevue when their premises are slated for redevelopment. Of course, relocation efforts require the availability of suitable spaces. To address that, the city is piloting an affordable commercial space incentive in the Wilburton area with the goal of creating more spaces with lower rents, specifically suited for small and creative businesses. The pilot is an experiment, and the hope is that it will be expanded across the city, especially in areas with creative economic identities, such as BelRed.

Jesse Canedo added that one of the proposals being developed for City Council consideration involves elevating the arts within the Bellevue Arts District incentive framework. Currently, public art serves as an incentive, but it is not highly ranked. The proposed change would raise the priority of arts-related incentives in the area immediately surrounding the light rail station to help catalyze and preserve the cultural vibrancy of the district.

Commissioner Martínez asked what major insights had been drawn from the peer city comparisons that can be applied in Bellevue. Corbin Hart responded

that the cities selected for comparison were chosen based on their status as employment centers within larger metro areas. While each peer city has a distinct economic profile, Bellevue can still learn from their approaches. Cambridge, Massachusetts, for instance, has a robust life sciences sector, which is something Bellevue wants to grow. Irvine, California, offers insight into the development of a strong creative economy, largely due to its ties to the film industry. Arlington, Virginia, offers models for higher education partnerships. While no definitive strategies have yet been finalized, the city hopes to draw effective lessons from each case.

Jesse Canedo expanded on the point by observing that many of the peer cities serve similar roles to Bellevue within their metro areas as secondary urban centers that must define their own cultural and economic niches. The peer cities face similar challenges, such as competition for arts funding and infrastructure that often remains concentrated in primary cities like Seattle. Bellevue, like its peers, must determine its unique value within the creative economy. Irvine is an example of an area where artists are employed through commercial industries, offering a broader employment base than Bellevue currently has.

Commissioner Hazra asked if Bellevue collaborates with nearby cities such as Redmond and Kirkland in developing its economic plan. Corbin Hart responded that the regional economy is highly interconnected, given the significant labor flow across city boundaries. Most workers and residents do not make decisions based on city lines, and that creates opportunities for economic specialization among neighboring cities. Bellevue lacks the infrastructure for a large aerospace sector, but the city still benefits from the presence of such industries in South King County. To support regional collaboration, Bellevue participates in the Greater Seattle Partners initiative, which includes King, Pierce, and Snohomish counties. The organization works on attracting businesses to the region and serves as a convener for regional economic planning. Bellevue benefits from the partnership in targeted sectors, including technology and life sciences, even if the city does not host all components of an industry. Bellevue has profited from the tech industry, and its inherent volatility makes diversification essential. Bellevue has a strong life sciences workforce but lacks sufficient lab space. Increasing such infrastructure will be a major focus going forward. The city's intent is to grow "tech-adjacent" sectors, such as artificial intelligence, gaming, and telecommunications, by leveraging existing strengths rather than building from scratch. All of the data will be made available once it is finalized.

Commissioner Bhargava expressed interest in reviewing the data and comparing Irvine, California, to Bellevue. Neighboring cities such as Newport Beach and Laguna Beach host successful arts festivals. Bellevue could emulate such models to become a regional hub for cultural tourism.

Commissioner Chen commented that the data appears to be different from what is shown in grant applications, where the traditional arts dominate. An interest was expressed in understanding how the community outreach was conducted, particularly regarding demographic information such as age and cultural background. Access to both the data and the outreach methodology will help to inform arts programming and grantmaking. Corbin Hart explained that a deliberate effort was made to include voices not typically heard in planning processes, including individuals from diverse cultural backgrounds, varying age groups, and across different industries. The intention was to identify and fill representational gaps in the city's community engagement strategy.

Chair Aldredge asked if consideration had been given to exploring the implementation of a vacant storefront program for artists along the lines of approaches taken by Seattle and Tacoma, particularly given the presence of retail vacancies in the city. Corbin Hart responded affirmatively, noting that the city has indeed evaluated the concept. Some property owners have done unique things in select areas. Avenue Bellevue has retail vacancies, and the property owners have independently initiated art pop-ups in their vacant retail spaces. While that is encouraging, Bellevue's overall retail vacancy rate is relatively low compared to Seattle and Tacoma. As a result, property owners are often reluctant to offer temporary pop-up space, believing they will secure a permanent lease quickly. Corbin Hart added that most long-term vacant spaces are in poorly trafficked areas, which limits the effectiveness and exposure of arts programming in those locations.

Jesse Canedo pointed out that some longstanding vacancies are the result of Bellevue's parking code. In certain cases, buildings have reached their maximum allowable occupancy based on available parking, which has prevented the leasing of additional space even when the space is physically available. The city is actively working to revise the parking ratio requirements in the Wilburton area to increase the available space for occupancy and use.

Chair Aldredge suggested that the parking requirements themselves might be leveraged as a tool to encourage artistic and cultural use, including temporary art pop-ups, without requiring additional public funding. The suggestion was noted for further exploration.

A member of the audience asked what Bellevue is doing to support international visitors and facilitate cultural festivals or events that might attract them. Jesse Canedo responded by noting that Bellevue is the second-largest hotel market in Washington State, following only Seattle, with approximately 2.2 million annual visitors. Bellevue has traditionally benefited from strong business travel linked to major companies such as Microsoft, T-Mobile, Amazon, and TikTok. In recent years, the city and Visit Bellevue have worked to encourage business travelers to extend their visits and participate in local cultural events. Arts programming plays a central role in boosting leisure visitation. Bellevue has, however, historically imposed high barriers to hosting events, including stringent application requirements and restrictive sound codes. The city has taken steps to improve its event infrastructure. Four new staff positions have been added to Parks and Community Services, Development Services, and Economic Development. The new hires are focused on special events, small business support, public programming, and tourism coordination. In addition, the city has hired a consultant to streamline the event application and permitting process with the goal of making it easier to organize a variety of cultural events ranging from small daily programs to larger festivals. In time, the city will benefit from increased international attention during events such as the upcoming FIFA tournament.

D. Partner Presentations

1. Japan Fair

Yuka Shimizu, Co-Chair of the Japan Fair, shared having founded two private schools in Bellevue and Redmond and emphasized the importance of arts, education, safety, and diversity in community development. Japan Fair 2025 will mark the event's ninth year. In 2024, the fair drew over 20,000 attendees, comprising residents and international visitors, as well as delegations from Japan and Europe. Even during the COVID-19 pandemic, the virtual Japan Fair reached viewers from up to 34 countries.

Yuka Shimizu explained that the mission of Japan Fair is to foster connections and empower communities through both traditional and contemporary Japanese art. The 2025 iteration of the fair will include traditional solo dance, Kendama, and performances by the renowned Takarazuka group. Additionally, the fair will include rare Ukiyo-e works and a pottery exhibit from the Tokugawa era, both of which will be displayed at the Meydenbauer Center during the weekend.

Yuka Shimizu thanked the city for awarding an arts grant to support the fair, which remains free and open to the public. To ensure safety and comfort for attendees, the organizers are adding security personnel and emergency medical staff. The 2026 event, marking the tenth anniversary of the Japan Fair, will feature expanded artistic participation showcasing both historical and contemporary Japanese artworks, while also providing greater opportunities for local Asian and Japanese artists to display their works to the public. It may take additional space in Meydenbauer Center to host art exhibits during future fairs. A strong desire was expressed to expand Japan Fair beyond a two-day event and into a lasting cultural bridge between Bellevue and Japan.

Yuka Shimizu announced a related cultural development project involving the Arboretum Foundation and the Committee for the Seattle Japanese Garden. A donor from Japan has offered to fund the relocation of a historic shogun gate constructed by Tokugawa Ieyasu in 1600. The artifact could become the centerpiece of a new public cultural space in Bellevue. Discussions with the Park Commission were delayed due to a canceled meeting in June, but presenting the project to the Arts Commission was intended to advocate for Bellevue's role in deepening Japanese cultural ties. The gate could become a symbolic gathering place, particularly if complemented by cherry blossom plantings to create a serene park destination.

The Japan Fair has the potential to support Bellevue's diversity initiatives and to elevate the city's profile as a cultural destination for regional and international visitors.

Alan Nakamoto, also representing Japan Fair, outlined the fair's mission, its historical roots, and its cultural contributions. The Japan Fair exists to celebrate the contributions of Japanese Americans to the community of Bellevue. The fair serves as a powerful example of how diversity can inspire innovation and unite communities. The event invites both Japanese and non-Japanese artists and cultural enthusiasts to collaborate and share ideas with the Bellevue community.

Japanese immigrants arrived in Bellevue in the early 20th Century and assisted in clearing land for agriculture, particularly strawberries and blueberries. Their contributions established Bellevue's early reputation for producing some of the best berries west of the Mississippi River. However, their work was interrupted by the forced relocation of 120,000 Japanese Americans to internment camps during World War II. Despite the injustice, many Japanese American men born in

the United States volunteered to fight for the country in Europe and the Pacific. The 442nd Regimental Combat Team, which was composed of Japanese American soldiers, became one of the most decorated units in U.S. military history. After the war, the United States and Japan became the cornerstone of Pacific cooperation for peace, fostering peace and economic growth, including the arrival of Japanese businesses and families in Bellevue.

The Japan Fair originated as a continuation of the Japan Festival previously overseen by Bellevue city officials in the 1990s. The Akimatsuri event at Bellevue Community College eventually evolved into the Japan Fair. In 2016, the event relocated to the Meydenbauer Center and expanded its mission to include both traditional Japanese arts and modern trends and technology. The fair embraced the contemporary youth culture alongside traditional values, reflecting the dual nature of Japan's artistic heritage. The event features a variety of exhibits, including tea ceremonies, martial arts, fashion inspired by Sakuracon, and displays from Japanese corporations. The collaboration with the Meydenbauer Center staff was praised, and their professionalism and flexibility in meeting event requirements were highlighted. The fair relies heavily on dedicated volunteers, whose efforts are essential to delivering meaningful and engaging exhibits.

Allen Nakamoto expressed gratitude for the financial and moral support received from the City of Bellevue through its arts grants. The grants are vital for supporting exhibits, workshops, equipment rentals, and infrastructure, all of which help sustain the fair's dynamic programming. The Japan Fair is an adaptive and evolving initiative that continues to respond to community needs while preserving its cultural legacy.

Yuka Shimizu added that the Japan Fair received the 2025 Event of the Year award from Visit Bellevue, which is a significant point of pride.

Commissioner Chen noted being a member of Ikibana International along with Commissioner Enomoto.

Commissioner Bhargava asked about the Shogun Gate. Yuka Shimizu said a city in the Northwest is being sought for displaying a historical artifact built by Tokugawa Ieyasu in the 1600s. Portland was initially considered as a host site, but the opportunity was ultimately offered to the Japanese Consulate. The hope is that Bellevue will become the city chosen for the gate, a culturally significant attraction that can ideally be paired with cherry blossoms to create a gathering space similar to the University of Washington's popular Sakura Gardens.

Commissioner Bhargava asked about the financial logistics of hosting the Japan Fair. Yuka Shimizu explained that the event's total operating budget is approximately \$80,000. Community donations and city grants each contribute about \$20,000, and the remaining costs are offset through vendor booth sales offered at accessible rates. There are concerns about the future sustainability of the fair. Despite the financial and operational challenges, there is a commitment to keeping the fair free and open to the public as a way to foster inclusivity and community bonding. The Japan Fair brings together diverse segments of the Japanese American community, including long-established families and recent immigrants working in the technology sector. The fair fosters unity among

groups that often operate separately, such as martial arts practitioners, tea ceremony groups, poets, and visual artists.

2. Artma

The Commissioners were shown a brief video showcasing Artma and its mission, which is to create more opportunities for female artists and to make art more accessible to the Eastside community. Sheli Hadara, co-founder and director of Artma, stated that the organization has successfully hosted ten exhibitions over the past three years, thanks to support from Bellevue's arts grants. The focus of the organization is not just on presenting art but on creating immersive, experiential environments that connect visitors emotionally to the artwork. The model avoids the traditional "white box" gallery in favor of curated, thematic installations that engage the senses and encourage participation.

Sheli Hadara said Art Ma is currently undergoing a transition. While the team members are full of creative energy, they are now working to build structure and sustainability. To that end, they have partnered with the Community Consulting Partnership, an organization that helps small nonprofits strengthen their internal operations and develop strategic plans. Over the next six months, Artma will focus on professionalizing its model and preparing to apply for larger opportunities, such as facility grants.

One of the greatest challenges facing the organization is the lack of affordable, high-traffic exhibition space. Successful events have been held in places such as Factoria, but the locations have not attracted foot traffic from the audiences likely to purchase art or engage deeply with the artistic community. Artma hopes to establish a permanent home in the growing BelRed Arts District where it can offer rotating exhibits, youth programs, community events, and artist workshops.

While the organization experienced increased art sales and engagement during a show held in Seattle, it remains committed to staying in Bellevue because its members live in the community and believe in fostering a rich local arts environment. The goal is to elevate the quality and accessibility of art on the Eastside, especially for younger generations.

Chair Aldredge asked if Artma had pursued funding from 4Culture. Sheli Hadara confirmed that they had received a 4Culture project grant, which was used to support a prior exhibition. The project grant was only a one-time opportunity. The organization is continuing to explore funding sources while simultaneously focusing on long-term planning to secure a permanent and publicly recognized location. The transient nature of pop-up events can make them difficult for the public to find and attend. A permanent home would create a predictable and accessible destination for community members and art patrons, allowing the organization to gain visibility over time as an arts destination. The city's continued development of the BelRed Arts District is laudable in that it emphasizes the value of cultivating such a cultural hub for both residents and visitors.

5. **Commission Quick Business**

A. Next Meeting Date

It was noted that the next Commission meeting would take place on September 3, following the traditional August break.

B. Utility Box Selection Panelist Needed

Manette Stamm highlighted the need to select a panelist to assist with reviewing submissions for a utility box art project. Over 176 applications were submitted for art to be installed on utility boxes across the city. The boxes are distributed across various neighborhoods and are not concentrated in any single location.

Manette Stamm suggested including a newer Commission member in the review process and recommended Commissioner Martínez.

Commissioner Martínez agreed to participate, and Manette Stamm confirmed that onboarding and review would take place through the end of July.

Manette Stamm said the September meeting will include revisiting the committee assignments, with a focus on public art review. The coming year will largely focus on implementing approved projects rather than initiating new ones.

6. Reports

A. Project Updates from Staff

Manette Stamm highlighted a neighborhood walk scheduled for July 10 in the BelRed Arts District beginning at 6:30 p.m. at the BelRed light rail station.

The Commissioners were advised to refer to their meeting packets for additional project updates.

7. Adjournment

Chair Aldredge adjourned the meeting at 5:49 p.m.



City of Bellevue staff liaison



Date