

CITY OF BELLEVUE  
HUMAN SERVICES COMMISSION  
MEETING MINUTES

February 3, 2025  
6:00 p.m.

Bellevue City Hall  
Room 1E-113

COMMISSIONERS PRESENT: Chair Singh, Commissioners Imfura, Hays, Phan, Vice Chair White

COMMISSIONERS REMOTE: Commissioner Rashid

COMMISSIONERS ABSENT: Commissioner Gonzalez

STAFF PRESENT: Christy Stangland, Toni Esparza, Ruth Blaw, Saada Hilts, Andrew Ndayambaje, Gysel Galaviz, Billy Allen, Department of Parks & Community Services; Hannah Bahnmler, Linda Abe, Department of Community Development

COUNCIL LIAISON: Mayor Robinson

POLICE LIAISON: Major Ellen Inman

GUEST SPEAKERS: Johnny Ohta, Ryther's Medication-Assisted Treatment Team

RECORDING SECRETARY: Gerry Lindsay

1. CALL TO ORDER and ROLL CALL

The meeting was called to order at 6:30 p.m. by Chair Singh who presided.

At the roll of the call, all Commissioners were present with the exception of Commissioner Imfura, who arrived at 6:05 p.m., Commissioner Rashid, who arrived at 6:10 p.m., and Commissioner Gonzalez.

New Commissioner Christopher Hays was introduced and welcomed to the Commission.

2. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

A. January 6, 2025

A motion to approve the minutes was made by Commissioner White. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Phan and the motion carried unanimously.

3. ORAL AND WRITTEN COMMUNICATIONS

Chair Singh took a moment to note that under Ordinance 6752, the topics about which the public

may speak during a meeting are limited to subject matters related to the city of Bellevue government and within the powers and duties of the Human Services Commission. Additional information about the new rules of decorum governing conduct of the public during meetings can be found in Ordinance 6752.

Alex Tsimerman noted getting cut off by Nazi pig and crazy female dog Mayor Robinson every time testimony is provided to the Council. The same is done systematically in every meeting.

Chair Singh cautioned the speaker to be respectful.

Alex Tsimerman said affordable housing is another fraud and fake. Every ten years the same trick is pulled and nothing happens. Nothing ever will happen when prices jump every year by 20 or 30 percent. There are only 100 affordable at 50 percent of area median income apartments in the city of 150,000. It is made worse by Mayor Robinson bringing another 30,000 slaves from the jungle to the city. There is no place for low-income people like teachers.

Rex Rempel, director of Bachelors of Applied Science and Behavioral Healthcare at Lake Washington Technical College, the closest public college that offers degrees in behavioral and social services, thanked the Commission, city staff and elected officials for the important work being done on behalf of the Eastside community. The problems locally are no less significant or complex than they are across the lake. It is the pleasure of the college and the Applied Science and Behavioral Health program to have relationships with behavioral healthcare, social service and healthcare agencies. Bellevue Fires supervisor Diane Swanberg is a faculty member in the department.

#### 4. COMMUNICATION FROM CITY COUNCIL, COMMUNITY COUNCIL, BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS – None

Mayor Robinson noted having previously served as liaison to Human Services Commission when first being elected to the Council. It is gratifying to once again take on the job. The Councilmembers watch the Commission from afar and understand that the work done by the group is one of the hardest assignments of any of the city's boards and commissions. The work of the Commission is really appreciated. Mayor Robinson noted holding a degree in Human Services and in Health Care Education as well as a degree in Physical Therapy, and having run a business for 20 years specialized in helping seniors age in place. Now as a member of the Council for the last twelve years, where the difficult decisions are made, it is clear that whatever is good for a child is good for the city. The Council's reflections and the decisions it makes are aimed at trying to keep trauma out of children's lives, giving them the stability they need, and providing the support services they require. Oftentimes, that also means helping their families. That is a big goal.

Bellevue used to be called an area of opportunity, which has meant that low-income families could find jobs and homes. There are many working in Bellevue who are low income because their jobs are low wage paying. That is another issue that needs to be addressed, but in the meantime, the fact is the city has a lot of 40-plus-hour-a-week people that do not earn a living wage, who find it very difficult to live in the city, but who choose to live in Bellevue because

they want their children to be in the school district. It is a generational change if a family can grow up in Bellevue, get into the school district, get the services that support them and, and get a good education. They have a better chance of graduating. They have a better chance of getting a job that will support them. The more who can get into the Bellevue school district, the better it is. Many of the agencies supported by the Commission support that mission. The children are the future.

The Council held its retreat last weekend and the Council. Part of the discussion was how to increase funding for human services. While there is no clear answer yet, the Council is looking at every option. Federal funding is never enough, but without it, there is not enough. It is hard deciding who should be funded and who should not. The goal of the Council is to try to fill the gap. The Council is all on board for doubling the affordable housing targets. The original target was reached early, but it was not the most ambitious target. The Council now supports the affordable housing goals and will work toward increasing the supply of affordable housing through zoning changes and by hopefully getting more middle housing developed. Incentives will be implemented to get affordable housing in new neighborhoods.

Major Ellen Inman shared that the Plymouth Housing project is progressing well through a strong partnership with the police department. The department is installing a lockbox at their facilities so that when the front desk is unstaffed, police officers can gain access if needed. In addition, the police department has identified points of contact that are available 24/7.

Major Inman also provided an update on the Community Crisis Assistance Team (CCAT), noting that since its inception in 2023, there have been more than 3100 CCAT responses. In those responses, a police officer and a social worker work together, and they have engaged with 1118 individuals. Out of those interactions, 365 referrals have been made to the Cares program, and 53 individuals have been diverted from using the emergency room, despite being high utilizers in the past.

## 5. STAFF AND COMMISSIONER REPORTS – None

Human Services Manager Ruth Blaw reminded the Commissioners, and especially the newest members, that the Commission is scheduled to have two meetings per month as stated in the bylaws. However, the group is currently experimenting with having one meeting per month combined with an educational community event around the topic of human services. The decision to continue the approach in the next quarter will be made based on the results of the experiment.

Giselle Galaviz announced two upcoming virtual events for the Commissioners to consider attending, beginning with an event organized by the East Side Homelessness Advisory Council on February 6 from 10:30 a.m. to 11:00 a.m. The second event was the Harborview Abuse and Trauma Centers Education Forum, scheduled for February 7 from 10:00 a.m. to 11:30 a.m. on the topic “Youth Activism and Healing Centered Engagement.”

Commissioner White noted having attended the Affordable Housing Strategy meeting in place of the second meeting. The format for the virtual meeting was good in that it utilized written

questions instead of passing a microphone around. Safety is a high priority for the residents of Bellevue and those who wish to reside in the city. The goal discussed at the meeting was to build or save 5700 low-income housing units over the next ten years.

Commissioner Phan explained that Eastside for All organizes an event called Safe Haven Cafecitos on a monthly basis. The event provides a safe and welcoming environment for participants and allows them to see the work of organizations that have received funding support from the city. Currently, the focus of the organizations is on providing accurate immigration resources, including information on lawyers and other related services. The next Cafecitos meeting will be held in February.

Commissioner Imfura noted having visited NAMI Eastside. During the visit, the group met with the Chief Executive Officer and the Operations Manager who shared a summary of the organization's efforts, which includes providing education for families dealing with mental health issues. The representatives also expressed their appreciation for the work and support received over the years.

Chair Singh noted having also attended the update on affordable housing. Significant changes will be announced within the next three months, including new zoning changes that will affect the community. The update reiterated that the project to build or save 5700 low-income housing units represents a major initiative that will have a substantial impact.

## 6. NEW BUSINESS

### A. Panel Conversation: Trends and Challenges in Addiction

Human Services Planner Saada Hilts allowed that addiction is a chronic condition that profoundly impacts physical and mental health, relationships, and career opportunities. It can devastate entire communities, as evidenced by the significant rise in drug-related fatalities. According to the Human Services Needs Update, both fatal and nonfatal drug overdoses have increased considerably in recent years, largely due to the presence of fentanyl. In King County alone, there were more than 1000 fentanyl overdose deaths in 2023, which represents a 47 percent increase compared to 2020. The data highlights the urgent need for a comprehensive response to the addiction crisis that focuses on prevention, treatment, and long-term recovery support.

The panel members were introduced as Johnny Ohta, a member of the Rythers Medication-Assisted Treatment team, who has worked extensively with underrepresented youth battling substance use in partnership with Kaiser Permanente; and Billy Allen, Opioid and Overdose Outreach Coordinator for the city.

Billy Allen said the position of Opioid and Overdose Outreach Coordinator is a relatively new position. The work focuses primarily on supporting the CCAT and CARES programs. The opioid crisis is a chronic and complex condition that affects not only individuals but also families, workplaces, and entire communities. The fentanyl crisis has reshaped the landscape of substance use disorder and has contributed to a sharp increase in overdose-related fatalities in

recent years. Although the trends have been devastating, recent data indicates that fatal overdoses are beginning to decline. It is difficult to pinpoint a single cause at this time because the research is still developing. However, the shift appears to be due to expanded harm reduction services, improved access to treatment, and comprehensive community-wide collaboration. The efforts include distributing leave-behind kits and working closely with police and fire departments.

One important aspect of the work involves carrying a small caseload of clients affected by opioid use disorder. A client named Deb, who had previously maintained long-term sobriety from heroin but who became overwhelmed by the impact of fentanyl, resulting in a quickly destabilized life. Deb was facing eviction despite being well-connected to Section 8 housing. Having overcome many barriers with the help of the community and family, the impact of fentanyl disrupted all stability. Through outreach and case management efforts, Deb was able to stabilize housing, avoid eviction, and, for the first time, engage in outpatient services at the Therapeutic Health Services methadone clinic. The story is a powerful reminder that individuals do not have to reach complete rock bottom before seeking intervention and help. It is important to continue to offer tailored support and to remove barriers to prevent unnecessary displacement and create additional pathways for recovery.

With regard to the work with CARES, Billy Allen said the organization is in the process of transitioning to a new database for referrals. At present, referrals come from police, fire, and community members. The goal is to establish a more streamlined system in which dispatch and call centers can send overdose clients directly to the CARES program. Currently, when referrals arrive, outreach is conducted in the community. Where possible, clients are met while they are still at the hospital to connect them with services before discharge.

The CARES work is centered on three core areas. First is prevention and education, which involves expanding community awareness, educating first responders, and providing overdose prevention tools such as naloxone and fentanyl test strips. Second is treatment and recovery access, which entails strengthening connections to medication assisted treatment, detox services, and wrap-around care through case management. The third is long-term support and stability where the aim is to ensure that once individuals engage with services, they remain supported and connected to resources that promote sustained recovery and housing stability. The opioid settlement funds are being used to expand and strengthen existing programs. The efforts not only save lives in the immediate crisis but also help to build a long-term recovery infrastructure.

Chair Singh asked if there is data on how many overdose cases are received on a weekly or monthly basis. Billy Allen noted not having that specific data yet. Work to collect the information is ongoing. Anecdotally, one or two referrals are received per week.

Commissioner Phan asked what the reception has been from community organizations and city members. Billy Allen said people are excited. Community members appreciate a targeted approach that directly addresses their struggles. Organizations are very interested in learning the best methods for making referrals. It is gratifying to connect individuals to resources such as CARES or CCAT. Often, substance use is the first barrier that leads to additional issues, such as housing instability. In those cases, clients are directed to homeless outreach services.

Saada Hilts noted that one the educational initiatives focuses on reducing stigma and asked what specific stigmas are associated with addiction, and how they are being addressing them. Billy Allen commented on hosting an event in October called Scare Away The Stigma. The purpose of the event was to dispel myths surrounding fentanyl. Misconceptions were clarified, such as the belief that one can overdose from mere secondhand exposure or from touching fentanyl. The event was aimed at first responders as well as families of those who are using substances. Education was provided on what addiction truly looks like and how it can change with different substances over time.

Commissioner Phan asked if there are any plans for targeted youth outreach. Johnny Ohta said Ryther's Medication-Assisted Treatment is located in Lake City, and noted having had experience with inpatient treatment, having previously worked for three years at an inpatient treatment center for gang-affiliated youth, at a long-term recovery house for young people, and for the last 18 years in drop-in centers for homeless youth. As a Substance Use Disorder Prevention (SUDP) licensed counselor in Washington State, Johnny Ohta noted having worked in many different settings with homeless youth, including drop-in centers, street outreach, and construction training programs; having assisted youth in reducing their substance use, including intravenous drug use; and having participated in need-based change programs. All of that work occurred before the fentanyl crisis, so by the time that epidemic emerged, there was a track record of engagement with communities, drop-in centers, outreach teams, treatment centers, and detox centers. Johnny Ohta also commented on working with Recovery High School in Seattle, a high school for youth in recovery that includes a residential component; and with young people who are in deep addiction, some of whom are minors, as well as those who are on various paths of recovery, stabilization, and family reunification. The Medication-Assisted Treatment team was built in 2018 for youth using heroin. It initially started with a doctor who engaged clients in a casual setting, and from that, developed into a full clinic at the Orion Center in Seattle. However, the emergence of the fentanyl crisis, along with the pandemic, introduced additional challenges. The targeted outreach efforts for youth are integrated into the broader work. The team continues to collaborate closely with young people in various settings to provide the support and resources they need.

Continuing, Johnny Ohta explained that the process of responding to the crisis followed a pattern. As the wave of cases arrived, needs changed and plans were made regarding how to respond. Outreach was conducted and there was a brief pause of a couple of weeks while the team determined how to remain engaged with the community. During that time, the team worked with a doctor and a prescriber and learned extensively about the available medications used in overdose prevention and treatment, including Naloxone, Suboxone, Methadone and Vivitrol. The doctor was actively involved in the outreach efforts by traveling around, visiting people at their homes, encampments, housing programs, and juvenile detention centers. The work was carried out in King County. Many young people have died during the fentanyl epidemic and the tragedies have had a profound effect on the team. Overdose prevention has become a central focus. The approach includes educating the community about overdose reversal techniques; providing medications promptly; and assisting individuals by talking with their families and connecting them with additional support such as treatment programs, shelters, housing, clothing, and communication devices. The overall goal is to stop people from dying and to initiate a

process that might lead to recovery.

Johnny Ohta stressed the importance of hands-on experience with overdose reversal training. Although there is an official training protocol, the best learning occurs by being directly involved with the process. The intensity of witnessing overdoses, often in the presence of law enforcement, makes the work very challenging. Nevertheless, post-overdose work is essential for providing support and follow-up care. The primary focus is on assisting young people between the ages of 13 and 25 who are dealing with a variety of challenges and drama. The team includes two young co-workers, a substance use disorder professional and a case manager, who are very passionate about their work. With support from Ryther, the community and King County, the team strives to help young individuals begin their path to recovery.

Johnny Ohta said the federal crisis changed the approach to drug use in the country. Previous strategies such as the “Just Say No” campaign were no longer effective, so the focus shifted toward harm reduction. There was a rapid onset of fentanyl use among teenagers in 2021 and 2022. Within two weeks, many teenagers who were initially experimenting with marijuana and alcohol were confronted with fentanyl use and severe withdrawal symptoms. That situation led to significant distress for both the young people and their families, prompting urgent preventive interventions. The speaker noted having personally administered Narcan to approximately sixteen individuals. In every instance where Narcan was given promptly, none of the individuals died as a result of the overdose. Narcan is very effective, but success depends on timing and proper technique.

Commissioner White asked what the average length of stay in a hospital is for those who overdose. Billy Allen said stays for overdose patients is typically not more than one day. Johnny Ohta added that persons who overdose often elect not to go to the hospital. A new overdose center is under development in downtown Seattle that will serve as a post-overdose facility, offering a safe space for up to three days where individuals can be medically stabilized and receive assistance in initiating treatment. The initiative is part of a broader crisis care strategy across King County.

Commissioner Hays asked about overdose reversal education in schools. Johnny Ohta said there is state law that mandates overdose education, including how to recognize an overdose and how to respond with Narcan. Even younger teenagers, who may be aware of overdose risks because of personal experiences, are being educated on the matters. Billy Allen added that a resource fair with the Bellevue School District is scheduled for March as part of its educational efforts.

Commissioner Phan asked what additional barriers are encountered when working with young people. Johnny Ohta said many young people under the age of 18 who experience an overdose are taken to Children’s Hospital. It is important to build relationships with the facilities where the individuals seek help. The key concern is not whether the facility refers them, but rather what services are offered when they arrive. There are a lot of barriers for unhoused youth and young adults that come into play. They do not have anywhere to go and often have a defeated attitude, both of which play into their addictions. Many are also being sex trafficked. In addition, many young people are afraid to interact with authority figures because of past encounters with the criminal justice system, such as accumulating warrants or facing court proceedings. There is a

need to open doors by accompanying the individuals through the process and by breaking down the barriers that prevent them from feeling secure in public spaces. The lack of family support and an established community is one of the most significant challenges.

Commissioner Rashid asked if there is any follow-up regarding addiction aimed at preventing reoccurrences. Johnny Ohta answered by sharing being personally in recovery after having used drugs addictively as a child. Recovery is an ongoing process that requires constant effort and vigilance against relapse. Many young people face an initial crisis, such as a car accident or an arrest, which prompts them to seek help through detoxification, medication, treatment, and counseling. Young people must continuously work on their recovery. Many clients who were once homeless and severely addicted eventually achieve stability as they grow older and develop greater maturity.

Commissioner Hays asked if the rise in youth homelessness in Bellevue equates to a rise in the use of fentanyl or other opiates. Johnny Ohta affirmed that the fentanyl epidemic affected all regions, including Bellevue, whether the problem was visible or not. In the early stages of the epidemic, many people became addicted, suffered withdrawal, and overdosed. Although comprehensive data is not yet available, the trends appear to be changing. The impact of witnessing young people die has influenced the decision-making of others in the same age group.

Commissioner White asked about the recovery high school. Johnny Ohta explained the campus located in Bellevue is known as Eastside Academy. Although it differs from a similar institution in Seattle, the Bellevue campus is part of the interagency alternative school program. There are approximately thirty students at the recovery high school, and every student is in recovery from severe addiction. The students attend a regular high school while participating in credit retrieval programs and standard graduation activities. In addition, they gather daily from 2:00 p.m. to 3:00 p.m. for a significant recovery circle, which is largely peer led. Students from all over King County are accepted into the program.

Saada Hilts thanked the panelists for humanizing the topic. Johnny Ohta stressed that the work of the opioid overdose outreach team and the Fire CARES team must remain visible because visible efforts encourage a community response. The absence of visibility does not mean the problems are not happening.

## B. 2025 Affordable Housing Strategy Update

Senior Affordable Housing Planner Hannah Bahnmler explained that the 2025 strategy is an update to the existing 2017 Affordable Housing Strategy. Affordable housing is defined as income-restricted or income-qualified housing. That means individuals must earn at or below a specified income threshold to occupy the housing, and there is also a cap on the rent they are required to pay. The intention is to ensure that housing costs do not exceed approximately 30 percent of an individual's income, leaving sufficient funds available for other basic needs.

Affordable housing is not just about numbers; there are people behind the conversations who face the real-life impacts of the guidelines. Those in need of affordable housing include older seniors on disability insurance who earn just under \$20,000 and who can afford only slightly



more than \$450 in housing costs. Low-wage or part-time workers making \$33,000 per year in Bellevue may only be able to afford around \$850 for housing. Despite the guidelines, many people continue to pay unaffordable housing costs. Housing unaffordability affects not only the renter community but also homeowners in Bellevue. Homeowners may struggle with unaffordability for various reasons, such as rising property taxes or the inability to downsize because the homes that meet their needs are too expensive to purchase at this time.

The update process is not starting with a blank slate, rather it builds upon the existing 2017 Affordable Housing Strategy. Mayor Robinson played an integral role in the initial work. Housing affordability was a big issue in 2017 but it is even bigger now. The 2017 strategy consisted of five strategies and 21 actions. The city completed almost all of the work that was set out in that plan, though a few actions remain in progress and are expected to be completed in the current year.

During 2024 a period of reflection took place which reviewed the implementation of the 2017 plan and summarized the outcomes. The review included data on the number of units produced, the amount of money invested, and the number of households served. The information provides a strong foundation for future work.

Continuing, Hannah Bahnmitter presented highlights from the implementation strategy, noting that one notable success was the multifamily tax exemption program that motivated market rate developers to commit to building 336 affordable units in market rate projects in Bellevue between 2017 and 2023. During that period, the city invested approximately \$27.5 million in affordable housing projects, primarily through the Housing Stability Program and contributions from the ARCH Housing Trust Fund. In addition, there was significant local corporate and private investment, with approximately \$540 million of private money supporting affordable housing projects in Bellevue. Of that amount, around \$200 million came from corporate philanthropy, with companies such as Amazon and Microsoft playing a role.

The 2017 strategy was not merely a list of actions; it also included a goal of building or preserving 2500 affordable housing units. As of 2024, that target had been effectively met, taking into account both completed projects and those currently under development. Following the achievement of that original goal in less time than expected, conversations began with the Council about establishing a new affordable housing target to guide the development of the updated strategy.

Hannah Bahnmitter said the city also implemented a work program in 2022 called Next Right Work which focused on the housing supply and increasing housing availability. The recent update of the city's long-range Comprehensive Plan resulted in significant changes to the city's housing policy guidance. The Council is very focused on affordable housing, as evidenced by its inclusion in the Council vision and priorities. The vision is now being used to mobilize city resources. For example, the affordable housing team is currently working to advertise two city-owned parcels for affordable housing in the BelRed and Wilburton neighborhoods. The work provides a solid base from which to build as the city prepares to update the strategy in 2025.

Updating the Affordable Housing Strategy is necessary in part because the Comprehensive Plan

update put in play new high-level guidance that needed to be translated into specific actions for the near and midterm. Moreover, many of the actions from the previous strategy had been checked off, and it was necessary to look ahead to determine the next steps. The Council has offered support for the project and has established a new affordable housing target.

The succinct goal of the updated plan is to identify near and midterm actions for the city to increase affordable housing over the next seven years. However, the focus of the plan is not solely on income-restricted affordable housing; it will also address housing stability, access, and overall market affordability. There is a wealth of previous work done by the city and many successful projects have been completed. The community and other stakeholders want to be involved in the conversation and in identifying the next actions the city will undertake. To that end, the process will include engaging with the community, technical stakeholders, and those most impacted by barriers to housing.

Hannah Bahnmitter said the strategy essentially is a short-term action plan designed to increase housing affordability. The plan will focus on income-restricted housing as well as other factors such as housing access and stability. The strategy will not merely be a list of actions; it will sequence those actions and identify the resources needed to implement them. There is a lot of ongoing work in areas such as middle housing, housing opportunities, mixed use areas, and the Wilburton. All of that work, which is in process and under review by the Planning Commission and the Council, will continue. This new project is not a replacement or substitution for those ongoing initiatives, nor is it a comprehensive needs assessment given that the city already has a 2022 housing needs assessment that remains current and relevant. The updated strategy will build on that work with the intent to update the needs assessment in two to three years.

There are going to be actions recommended in the plan that may need further work. The strategy itself will not amend the city code or revise the Land Use Code. If there are any recommendations regarding land use, they will go through a subsequent process that will provide additional opportunities for engagement and refinement. The plan is not intended to just sit on a shelf. The intent of the implementation plan of the Affordable Housing Strategy is to inform interdepartmental work plans so that the recommended actions are actually implemented.

With regard to the new affordable housing target, Hannah Bahnmitter noted that the Council engaged in discussions 2024 to determine an appropriate guidepost. The methodology used was based on overall housing growth as committed to in the long-range Comprehensive Plan, using a ten-year increment of growth. The city expects to grow by 14,000 units over the next ten years. To answer the question of how many of those units should be affordable, the methodology used was derived from the Bellevue needs assessment and estimated the need at different income levels. The target that was established is to build or preserve 5700 affordable units in the next ten years, broken down by different income bands. The city will examine needs not only for households earning less than 80 percent of the area median income but also for various income levels. The objective is to meet the full continuum of need, rather than only addressing the highest income levels.

The new target is recognized as being ambitious. The 2017 target was chosen because it was believed to be achievable. In contrast, the new approach focuses on actual community needs

rather than solely on the current capacity to build. Compared to what was produced in the last seven years, the city will have to almost double its production and preservation of affordable housing. In particular, the lowest income levels will require a dramatic increase in production, which will necessitate substantial new resources, including revenue for both capital and operating costs. That will require the city to pursue more challenging projects rather than simply relying on low-hanging fruit.

The update will build on the existing progress made at the city, incorporating the extensive conversations already held with the community. The goal is not to repeat past discussions but to learn new information and continue involving people in the process. The strategy will also involve implementing the new policy guidance. In addition to the Comprehensive Plan, the city has conducted additional analyses, including the Racially Disparate Impact Analysis, which will guide the actions to be taken over the next seven years. Engaging representative voices will be very important throughout the process. Housing has a disproportionate and disparate impact on the community and historically the voices of those most affected have not been adequately heard. The new policy guidance and city priorities now require reaching out to those who are most impacted by housing issues.

Hannah Bahnmitter shared with the Commission the timeline for the project, noting that in the early launch phase the efforts are focused on building awareness and expanding the audience. In about April the work will shift to technical media analysis and refinement, and at that point the team will assess different actions, evaluate potential outcomes, and work through a prioritization process. The process is challenging because there are many affordable housing needs and limited resources and capacity, which will necessitate tradeoffs in regard to which issues should be addressed first and how much to invest in various priorities. Adoption of the plan is anticipated by the end of the year. The plan will be presented to the Council in October and November for final adoption. Unlike some other plans that go through the Planning Commission, the plan will go directly to the Council, although the Planning Commission will be kept informed throughout the process.

The current focus is concentrated on spreading the word. Two informational sessions have already been held for organizational partners, and a public information session and kickoff occurred last week. In addition, three education events are planned for March and April in order to reach different audiences and build a knowledge base on affordable housing. The intention is that future conversations will be informed by a common understanding of affordable housing. That shared knowledge will support the planning process.

At the assessment phase there will be engagement with technical stakeholders and community-based organizations. The team plans to conduct questionnaires, focus groups, and host community conversations with the organizations and the people they serve, ensuring that the voices of those most impacted are heard. When it is time to refine the plan, an online open house and additional information sessions for the general public will be organized, along with ongoing community conversations and opportunities for public comment. The Council will be encouraged to listen to what the community has communicated during the process.

A March 6 event, part of the education series, will be held in partnership with an organization

called Better Cities Film Festival, which curates short films from communities across the United States and around the world. The goal is to examine housing efforts in other communities and discuss what can be learned and adapted for Bellevue. Two additional education events are tentatively planned for April, one of which will focus on the fundamentals of affordable housing, covering key terminology and data. A second event planned for April will feature a panel with participants from the development community, housing providers, and residents who live in affordable housing.

There is an online engagement hub that community members and stakeholders are encouraged to visit and subscribe to for updates. The hub includes a tool that allows people to share their housing stories and ask questions. The team received several questions and housing stories following the public kickoff.

Chair Singh noted having heard reports from Seattle that many residents in affordable housing are not paying the expected rent and maintaining their housing. Increasing property taxes, challenges in permitting processes, and zoning changes might adversely affect neighborhoods. Because taxpayer money is used to support affordable housing programs, there should be measures such as credit checks to ensure that only those who genuinely need assistance receive it. Accountability is necessary so that families who sincerely require support are given priority, while those who might attempt to exploit the system are prevented from doing so. Hannah Bahnmitter allowed that there are challenges associated with operating affordable housing. The goal is not simply to construct buildings, but to ensure that the buildings operate successfully over the long term, serving as many residents as possible and helping people remain in their homes. Affordable housing projects have limited operational flexibility, so when issues such as non-payment of rent or maintenance problems arise, the project budgets may not have the flexibility required to address the issues. The city does not operate affordable housing directly, but it supports partners who manage the projects. Some projects that receive investment through land use and tax incentives are monitored by ARCH, a coalition that works with market rate developers that include affordable units to ensure compliance with requirements such as collecting household income information and charging the appropriate rent.

Commissioner Phan asked how the city deals with rent increases in existing housing, noting that some apartment buildings are allowed to increase rents after a current lease expires, sometimes at rates that do not follow the general trend. Hannah Bahnmitter said Washington law does not currently authorize local jurisdictions to establish caps on rent increases; such a policy would require a change at the state level. Even within affordable properties, which are often tied to metrics such as the area median income that change annually, rent increases can sometimes be more dramatic than expected. The multifamily tax exemption program has implemented rent stabilization metrics to limit how much rent can increase over time for the same tenant. The city will continue to explore opportunities to help tenants adjust to rising rents.

Commissioner Imfura asked how the loss of income or employment affects the ability of a person to remain in an affordable housing unit. Hannah Bahnmitter explained that the eligibility qualifications and processes for maintaining residence in affordable housing are determined on a project-by-project basis; different providers have their own rules and procedures. There are resources such as rent assistance that are sometimes available to help bridge gaps in affordable

housing projects. At the public kickoff event a question was asked about what happens if rents increase to the point where tenants can no longer afford to remain in their affordable housing units. While some rules provide flexibility to adjust for increased income, that is not a completely satisfactory answer. Affordable housing developers face significant challenges in generating sufficient revenue to operate their buildings, and individual tenants may face personal challenges that require additional support. Unfortunately, the rental assistance available in the community is not currently adequate to meet the need.

The session concluded with the speaker thanking everyone for their attention and participation. The speaker expressed gratitude for the community interest in the process and reiterated the commitment to follow up with updates and further opportunities for engagement.

Commissioner Hays asked if the flexibility of operations is the biggest barrier to developing affordable housing, and whether there is any pushback by the public toward the development of more affordable housing. Hannah Bahnmitter said the greatest challenge in building affordable housing is funding. Although operational issues are significant, funding is essential to ensure that a project can operate successfully. There are public concerns and perceptions about affordable housing that must be addressed, primarily in regard to the lowest income levels. When discussing a market rate building that includes a few affordable units, community concern tends to focus on higher impact types of housing such as emergency housing, transitional housing, and shelters. In those cases, community hesitancy may arise. To help overcome the challenges, the city has developed community guides and guides for developers on how to engage with the community on supportive and emergency housing projects. The purpose of the guides is to address potential pushback and to help ensure the success of projects.

Commissioner Hays asked if achieving the goal of 2700 new affordable housing units will completely satisfy community needs, or whether there would still be a gap. Hannah Bahnmitter said the 2700 unit target was based on the quantified community need as of 2022. However, city borders are flexible when it comes to people in the region and there are other communities and individuals who also have needs. Achieving the goal will have a significant impact, but there will likely continue to be a need in Bellevue and the surrounding region that would benefit from additional investment.

## 7. ADJOURNMENT

Chair Singh adjourned the meeting at 7:45 p.m.