

CITY OF BELLEVUE
BELLEVUE PLANNING COMMISSION
MINUTES

June 25, 2025
6:30 p.m.

Bellevue City Hall
Room 1E-113

COMMISSIONERS PRESENT: Chair Goepple, Vice Chair Khanloo, Commissioners Kennedy, Lu, Nilchian, Villaveces

COMMISSIONERS REMOTE: Commissioner Ferris

COMMISSIONERS ABSENT: None

STAFF PRESENT: Kate Nesse, Thara Johnson, Jesse Canedo, Corbin Hart, Ellie He, Colin Munson, Department of Community Development; Nick Whipple, Kristina Gallant, Kirsten Mandt, Department of Development Services; Matt McFarland, City Attorney's Office

COUNCIL LIAISON: Not Present

GUEST SPEAKERS: None

RECORDING SECRETARY: Gerry Lindsay

1. CALL TO ORDER
(6:32 p.m.)

The meeting was called to order at 6:32 p.m. by Chair Goepple who presided.

Chair Goepple took a moment to welcome new Commissioners Mariah Kennedy and Arshia Nilchian.

2. ROLL CALL
(6:36 p.m.)

Upon the call of the roll, all Commissioners were present.

3. APPROVAL OF AGENDA
(6:37 p.m.)

A motion to approve the agenda was made by Commissioner Lu. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Villaveces and the motion carried unanimously.

4. REPORTS OF CITY COUNCIL, BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS – None
(6:38 p.m.)

5. STAFF REPORTS
(6:38 p.m.)

A. Planning Commission Meeting Schedule

Senior Planner Dr. Kate Nesse took a few minutes to review the Commission's schedule of upcoming meeting dates and agenda items.

6. WRITTEN AND ORAL COMMUNICATIONS (6:40 p.m.)

Chair Goepple 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 Planning Commission. Additional information about the new rules of decorum governing conduct of the public during meetings can be found in Ordinance 6752.

A. Written Communications (6:40 p.m.)

Dr. Kate Nesse noted having sent to the Commissioners several written communications, one about the Critical Areas Ordinance but most about the issue of middle housing.

B. Oral Communications (6:41 p.m.)

Charles Bauman thanked the Commissioners for their time and energy spent working on behalf of the city. With regard to the Critical Areas Ordinance, it was noted that the current ordinance code mandates wide prescriptive buffers that consume land best suited for housing and inhibiting redevelopment, particularly in already degraded urban areas such as BelRed. What is needed are performance-based solutions that integrate modern stormwater engineering to achieve ecological goals without sacrificing housing development. Best available science is a tool to support the city's broader goals. Housing does not need to be traded for habitat, but the only way to restore habitat will be by building more housing.

Joe Kunzler emphasized the necessity of approving housing near Bellevue's light rail stations in order to generate commerce, tax revenue, and inclusive growth. The Commission was encouraged to consider preparing for technological shifts, such as electric vertical takeoff and landing (eVTOL) vehicles and robot taxis by engaging in advance planning. The Commission was encouraged to plan for a new era in clean, green mobility. Gratitude was expressed for the Commission's actions to enforce its rules against Alex Tsimerman at the previous meeting. There is no call for the kind of bigotry shown by Alex Tsimerman over the years.

Alex Tsimerman began with a Nazi salute and called the Commissioners dirty damn Nazi fascist pigs before challenging the decorum of the meeting decorum by turning to the audience rather than addressing the Commission as required. Chair Goepple instructed Alex Tsimerman to face the Commission, speak directly into the microphone, and comply with the established rules. Alex Tsimerman initially refused, arguing about speaking rights and accusing the Chair of censorship, but after repeated warnings eventually complied. Concern was then expressed over the rising cost of housing in Bellevue by comparing historical rent prices from forty years ago to the

present. The increase in housing costs was tied to demographic changes about which inflammatory and racially charged remarks were made. A proposal was made in favor of a policy that would reserve ten percent of housing in the city for individuals with incomes below \$50,000, as well as disabled persons and those on social security.

Chair Goeppeler stated for the record that Alex Tsimmerman's comments were not relevant to the scope of the Planning Commission's duties, were in violation of Ordinance 6752, and did not reflect the values of the City of Bellevue.

Lee Sargent praised the Commission for the effective actions taken at the prior meeting. The City Council at its meeting on June 24 essentially approved several amendments proposed by the Commission. It is evident the Commission's work has been well received. The Commission represents the city and is focused on the needs of the city. The Commission is to be commended for every effort it puts into the task.

Martin A. Selig referenced Policy CL-87 and encouraging the Commission to create strong incentives for opening piped stream segments. The opening of the streams will provide a calming, pleasant ambient sound for residents, particularly those in multifamily situations. The Commission was urged to avoid regulations that would deter property owners from undertaking such projects.

7. PUBLIC HEARING – None
(6:57 p.m.)

8. STUDY SESSION
(6:57 p.m.)

A. Economic Development Plan Update

Assistant Director Jesse Canedo stated that the adopted 2020 Economic Development Plan aimed to diversify Bellevue's economy and support small businesses. Over the last five years through a variety of private/public partnerships, a host of new services have been created that are improving the quality of life and quality of place. The Old Bellevue Merchants Association was revised; the BelRed Arts District Alliance was formed; and Tourism Promotion Area was formed with Redmond that funds the free Bellhop electric shuttle service and a discounted airport hotel shuttle. Additional programs include a pioneering startup accelerator that required no equity from participating companies. The efforts have strengthened the foundation for economic vitality and cultural placemaking in Bellevue. The focus of the work to update the plan is on tourism, small business startup infrastructure, and other elements necessary to achieve the audacious job targets of 70,000 jobs by 2044.

Business Development Manager Corbin Hart said the guiding principles for updating the plan were adopted in December 2024. From March through May 2025, the focus was on data analysis and community engagement. The project is currently in the strategic framework phase, and adoption of the final plan is targeted for December 2025.

The guiding principles are intended to serve as core themes for the update. They include maintaining a diverse and resilient economy; supporting entrepreneurs and small businesses:

encouraging partnerships and implementation tools; advancing the creative economy; bolstering tourism; and enhancing public spaces.

The community engagement element builds on five years of previous outreach, including surveys, small business programs, and retention efforts. The current phase also features new focus groups and one-on-one interviews that target voices that may have been previously underrepresented. The Eastgate and Factoria areas have received specific attention due to upcoming neighborhood area planning efforts and their unique economic challenges.

Corbin Hart said the data analysis has included updating the list of peer city comparisons to include Irvine, California, and Plano, Texas. The employment analysis for the years 2018 through 2023 showed significant growth in the technology and professional services sectors, while sectors such as retail and entertainment saw declines due to the pandemic. The healthcare and social assistance sectors showed modest growth.

In Eastgate specifically, office space vacancy was identified at forty percent, far exceeding national averages. Retail spaces exhibited stronger performance, although total stock is limited. Employers reported difficulty in attracting workers to offices lacking amenities such as restaurants and cafes. There is a transition occurring toward more mixed use districts and housing. Some opportunities still exist, particularly for spaces with specialized infrastructure like built-in data centers.

Following the strategic framework phase the focus will turn to drafting strategies, and that ultimately will focus on adoption of the plan. Particular emphasis was placed on the importance of integrating the Planning Commission's neighborhood area planning efforts in Eastgate and Factoria, as well as considerations for the BelRed LUCA and the creative economy.

Commissioner Lu noted having personal experience working from the WeWork space in Eastgate and observed that there is a strong demand for co-working facilities. The problem is a lack of nearby amenities, particularly food services, which serves as a barrier to a more vibrant district. The question asked was if co-location and access improvements could be required in new construction or be addressed through modifications to existing structures. Corbin Hart responded that while long-term redevelopment would be necessary to achieve that outcome, there are also potential short-term interventions. Jesse Canedo added that having high-capacity transit lines come to the area will play a role in shaping Eastgate's development.

Commissioner Nilchian asked for clarification on the selection of peer cities in the data analysis. Jesse Canedo explained that the peer cities were chosen for their roles as secondary employment hubs in metropolitan areas and because they offer different yet instructive models. Cities like Cambridge and Irvine were included for their strengths in life sciences and the creative economy, respectively. Boulder was excluded due to university-related data skew, and Santa Monica was seen as too narrowly focused on tourism. From a business attraction standpoint, cities like Arlington and Irvine are frequently used as points of comparison during corporate site selection.

Commissioner Nilchian also inquired about the breadth of the industries engaged in the community outreach process. Corbin Hart said a broad range of industry sectors were included. Overall, there were some sixty stakeholders consulted in the areas of technology, interactive media, gaming, retail, hospitality, and for-profit and nonprofit arts organizations. Additionally, businesses of varying sizes were engaged to ensure representative input.

Commissioner Ferris asked if there are plans to promote Bellevue more actively using the data

collected to tell the city's story and attract businesses. Corbin Hart said the business attraction and tourism sectors expressed similar questions during the engagement process. There is ongoing coordination with the city's Destination Management Organization Visit Bellevue, which recently completed a destination development plan.

Jesse Canedo added that the city works with Greater Seattle Partners which conducts regional business marketing, including on behalf of the city. There are, however, staffing constraints that limit Bellevue's direct outreach. Commissioner Ferris stated that Bellevue is unique in terms of resources and attractions and it would be good to utilize the collected data to attract more diverse businesses.

Commissioner Ferris's commented that both the Eastgate and Factoria neighborhoods are well located. Factoria feels underutilized and underdeveloped; it could be fantastic if not limited by transportation issues. With regard to Eastgate, it is time to start dreaming of how to make it more robust, particularly given the existing assets.

Commissioner Villaveces asked how Bellevue College factors into the plan, especially in regard to workforce development. Corbin Hart confirmed that the college is a key stakeholder in the update and plays a significant role in workforce education, particularly in the healthcare and technical fields. Bellevue College is also a major local employer. Higher education will be a focus of the plan update.

Jesse Canedo added that Bellevue College does a fantastic job of filling several niches in the workforce stream. It produces an incredible number of nurses, dental assistants and other technical-skill areas. There have been talks with the college about what it envisions in terms of a four-year research level institution. There have been talks about working with other educational institutions such as the University of Washington and Washington State University to help fill the pipeline for higher-skilled folks, including computer sciences.

Commissioner Kennedy expressed enthusiasm for the Economic Development Plan and appreciation for the staff's work. The importance of workforce development was stressed. The question asked was if zoning or other planning issues are obstructing Bellevue College's potential growth, and how the plan might translate into clear policy recommendations that will execute on the identified themes. Jesse Canedo affirmed the critical role of land use policy and described the Commission's work as being critically important in terms of laying the foundational structure upon which economic growth is built.

Corbin Hart said the Economic Development Plan is a functional plan designed to implement the broader framework established by the Comprehensive Plan. The plan generates specific forward-looking actions, and while not all of them are immediately actionable by the Commission, some recommendations may lead to planning-related directives. For instance, zoning adjustments or incentives could emerge from the plan's findings, which would then return to the Planning Commission for review and implementation.

Commissioner Kennedy highlighted the statistic that 97 percent of Bellevue businesses employ fewer than 100 people. As such, it is very important to identify how the Commission can help support small businesses and overall economic diversity. It should be made known what specific things the Commission can do in terms of zoning to support and attract businesses, possibly through electrical upgrades or more flexible building uses. Corbin Hart said the Eastgate and Factoria Neighborhood Area Plans process represents immediate opportunities for the Commission to enact zoning policies aligned with the goals.

Jesse Canedo further explained that technical feedback from developers and small businesses is being shared with various city departments, including around structural considerations such as ceiling heights and load-bearing capacities for life science facilities, as well as micro-scale planning elements like sidewalk widths required for outdoor dining. All such feedback informs potential land use code modifications that would eventually come before the Planning Commission.

Dr. Kate Nesse confirmed the relevance of the presentation by noting upcoming work the Commission will undertake on the neighborhood plans for Eastgate and Factoria, the BelRed LUCA, and a potential code update affecting institutional zoning that would apply to Bellevue College.

Commissioner Kennedy asked about the use of benchmarking in selecting peer cities and asked if it is unique to the Economic Development Plan. Corbin Hart said the peer cities are indeed unique to the Economic Development Plan. Other plans also use benchmarking in focusing on other areas.

Vice Chair Khanloo noted being a user and supporter of the shuttle program. With regard to Eastgate's vacancy rate, the Commissioner asked if the 40 percent figure is based on square footage. Corbin Hart said Eastgate has approximately five to six million square feet of office space, of which 40 percent is currently vacant. Downtown Bellevue, by comparison, is home to approximately 23 million square feet. Eastgate is Bellevue's second-largest employment center.

Vice Chair Khanloo emphasized the importance of trend analysis and suggested that including vacancy and employment data from earlier years could help illustrate patterns, particularly pre- and post-pandemic. Jesse Canedo said job growth remains positive overall, though Eastgate has experienced a long-term decline in desirability for certain businesses.

Chair Goepple raised the issue of small business displacement during redevelopment and shared a personal observation about local businesses that have closed, something that is concerning in terms of the long-term impacts on service diversity in the city. Jesse Canedo acknowledged the issue and explained that it is a known challenge of urbanization.

Corbin Hart noted that specific code changes have been implemented to preserve retail space configurations that are more suitable to small tenants. The Wilburton update included a novel affordable commercial space incentive. However, the issue extends beyond Wilburton and will require ongoing attention through policy and programmatic efforts. Displacement is specifically mentioned as a guiding principle for the update. Steps have been taken over the past five years to make sure that retail spaces are built to be more suitable to small businesses.

Chair Goepple emphasized the importance of Bellevue College as an asset for the community. While there is an interest in collaborating with more elite institutions, those institutions can take care of themselves. The city should continue to focus on where it can make real impacts on the lives of people through supporting Bellevue College's continued role in workforce development, particularly for residents seeking upward mobility. Impact for citizens should be prioritized over prestige in choosing educational partnerships.

Commissioner Lu observed that the sectors in decline, such as arts, entertainment, accommodations, and food services, are typically high-volume, low-margin industries and expressed concern that the sectors may be disproportionately affected by state-level tax policies,

such as business and occupation taxes and payroll taxes that tend to over penalize lower margin, high-volume businesses. While tax policy lies beyond the Commission's control, the city should explore ways to build resiliency for the vulnerable industries. The importance of maintaining a diverse set of employment opportunities was emphasized.

Commissioner Kennedy observed that the plan underscores the importance of making Bellevue not only a business-friendly location but also a place where people want to live. Businesses tend to select locations based on the ability to attract and retain skilled employees, which is closely tied to quality-of-life factors. Features such as parks, trails and dining options contribute significantly to livability and by extension economic success. The question asked was whether livability metrics influenced the selection of peer cities for benchmarking. It is disappointing that Boulder was excluded given the desirability of that city. Corbin Hart allowed that quality of life was an important factor in the selection of peer cities, although each city emphasizes different elements. Some prioritize infrastructure or tax environments, while others, like Bellevue, excel in livability. Many cities claim high quality of life, but Bellevue is particularly well-positioned to support that claim.

Jesse Canedo said the variety of plans developed by the city focus, from economic development to affordable housing and parks, use their own benchmarking methods to evaluate the relevant attributes. The challenge for Bellevue's long-range planners is to synthesize the best features across the disciplines in order to create a high-quality, integrated community.

Commissioner Villaveces highlighted the lack of mid-sized commercial spaces between large corporate campuses and micro-units in co-working facilities and stressed that Eastgate presents a clear opportunity to introduce reasonably priced, appropriately sized units for smaller businesses without the financial backing of major tech companies. With regard to co-housing, the Commissioner argued that Eastgate's infrastructure, its proximity to Bellevue College, and its transit connectivity make it an ideal location to pilot that form of housing. The Commission was encouraged to consider the option as a means to fill the current economic and housing gaps.

B. Sustainable Bike Bellevue Environmental Stewardship Plan Update (2026-2030) (7:42 p.m.)

Planning Director Thara Johnson explained that the Sustainable Bellevue Environmental Stewardship Plan was first established in 2020 and serves as a strategic roadmap for achieving the 2030 and 2050 climate and sustainability goals. The update currently underway will address the period from 2026 through 2030. The plan addresses both community-wide and municipal efforts.

Colin Munson, Climate and Electric Mobility Coordinator, reminded the Commissioners that an introductory presentation had occurred in January but acknowledged that the topic was still relatively new to many Commissioners. The plan addresses six core areas: energy and buildings, mobility, climate change, natural systems, materials and waste, and the green economy. The plan also includes a parallel focus on municipal operations, but those efforts fall outside the purview of the Commission. The city aims to lead by example in its internal sustainability practices.

The update work was launched by the City Council in October and the process is currently in Phase Two, which involves drafting and refining strategies based on public and stakeholder input. Engagement efforts are currently underway, including meetings with internal departments, external stakeholders, and boards and commissions. Two major upcoming milestones are a City Council presentation on July 22 to review draft strategies, followed by the anticipated adoption

of the final plan in mid-November.

The plan is intersectional and holistic and looks at sustainability from all angles. It includes six primary focus areas, each with sub-goals. Each area supports the overarching greenhouse gas emissions reduction targets adopted in the Comprehensive Plan. While the plan aims to reduce emissions, it also promotes broader goals such as livability, transit accessibility, and strategic placement of jobs and housing near transportation infrastructure.

Colin Munson said Phase One of the community engagement process was carried out between January and April. Given the scope of the plan, staff prioritized inclusive outreach, particularly among underrepresented communities and youth. Partnerships were established with community-based organizations such as Eastside for All and the Little Masters Club, the latter of which facilitated the involvement of youth sustainability ambassadors to extend outreach to younger residents. While no engagement process is perfect, the strategies were informed by a wide cross-section of Bellevue's diverse population. Staff consulted with every city department and with senior leadership, and feedback was also collected from all relevant boards and commissions. Community engagement is ongoing and will continue throughout the drafting period. The draft plan will be open for public comment later in the year.

Colin Munson said two major themes emerged from the community feedback. First, there was a strong and repeated call for the city to focus more seriously on climate resilience, particularly in light of recent events such as the bomb cyclone, the 2021 heat dome, and recurring smoke events. Residents urged the city to plan for adaptation and emergency response. Second, the public overwhelmingly supported prioritizing sustainability and climate action. Community members expressed readiness for ambitious, well-funded actions to meet the city's environmental targets.

The Commissioners were shown a simple graph illustrating Bellevue's greenhouse gas emissions by source. It was noted that transportation emerged as a dominant contributor. The chart also emphasized that while achieving emissions targets depends heavily on state and federal action, Bellevue itself must still reduce local emissions by 30 percent to meet its 2030 target. Accordingly, every proposed strategy in the plan is designed to be actionable, measurable, and impactful.

Three tiers of strategies were proposed: priority strategies, which will deliver measurable emissions reductions within the 2026–2030 period; catalyst strategies, which are foundational actions that may not yield immediate results but are essential to achieving the 2050 carbon-neutral goal and resilience strategies, which focus on Bellevue's ability to respond to climate-related impacts, even if they do not directly reduce emissions.

Colin Munson stressed that the proposed strategies remain in draft form and are still undergoing internal and external review. Many of the strategies will return to the Commission for formal evaluation and approval through the regular city processes. The three draft strategies from the Climate Change Element were in regard to resilience. The first focused on enhancing community resilience by improving protections for public health and quality of life during events like smoke or heat waves. The second was targeted at city and community infrastructure to ensure it is climate-resilient. The third addressed air quality concerns, especially given that urban growth may exacerbate pollution.

The draft strategy regarding the buildings and energy sector was focused on promoting green building practices with an emphasis on affordable housing and equitable development.

In the mobility and land use section, four strategies were outlined, two of which were particularly relevant to the Commission, specifically the catalyst strategies regarding accessibility and connectivity, and on sustainable land use. The two priority strategies were in regard to improving mobility options and priorities related to electric vehicle infrastructure.

Commissioner Villaveces suggested that rainwater harvesting is a critical sustainability opportunity that should be added to the plan. A 10,000-square-foot lot with 40 percent roof coverage could yield approximately 79,000 gallons of rainwater annually given the average rainfall, a volume that could meet the entire indoor water needs for two to three individuals, or half of the total indoor and outdoor needs. The only technical requirements would be cisterns and basic purification systems. The current development practices redirect the resource into stormwater systems rather than into on-site reuse. Such systems could also enhance resilience in the face of wildfires by supplying decentralized water storage. There should be zoning code updates and stronger policy incentives to normalize rainwater capture in residential and commercial development. Colin Munson allowed that rainwater capture had not previously emerged in the discussions, but agreed to follow up on how to incorporate it into the plan or the related strategies.

Commissioner Lu highlighted a discrepancy between two greenhouse gas reduction targets shown in the presentation, one of 95 percent and the other of 100 percent, and asked for clarification. Colin Munson explained that the difference relates to definitions between carbon neutrality and net-zero goals. Municipal operations have distinct targets from the broader community. Bellevue's municipal operations have already surpassed a 2030 reduction target of 50 percent, having reached 54 percent. The city's broader community goal remains carbon neutrality by 2050.

Commissioner Lu asked which public-private partnerships are most critical to achieving Bellevue's sustainability goals. Colin Munson identified Puget Sound Energy as a vital partner, especially in transitioning to renewable energy. Because energy supply constitutes a significant portion of Bellevue's carbon footprint, any shift depends heavily on Puget Sound Energy's alignment with state policy. In the transportation sector, King County Metro and Sound Transit are crucial collaborators, especially for sustainable mobility strategies.

Commissioner Nilchian stressed the importance of Bellevue's tree canopy. The canopy enhances environmental quality but it also poses vulnerability, as evidenced by widespread damage during the recent bomb cyclone. Strategies are needed to treat trees as infrastructure in planning for storm resilience related to high winds. Additionally, there should be a formal wildfire protection plan developed. Colin Munson responded that wildfire planning is being addressed under a separate hazard mitigation plan, rather than the environmental stewardship plan, to avoid duplication. Strategies related to tree management are indeed part of the current resilience framework.

Commissioner Ferris voiced strong support for the efforts to engage students, something that is essential for long-term planning success through partnerships with organizations like the Little Masters Club. A concern was raised about federal policy changes under a potentially less supportive administration and Commissioner Ferris asked whether such shifts could compromise Bellevue's climate goals. Colin Munson answered that while federal funding may decline, Washington State's robust environmental policies, including the Clean Energy Transformation Act, will mitigate the need for federal leadership. Some initiatives, such as electric vehicle infrastructure, are facing legal uncertainty, but Bellevue remains committed to pursuing the

strategies and adjusting as necessary based on evolving legal and political conditions.

Commissioner Ferris referred to the inclusion in the plan of a resilience hub pilot project and expressed the hope that it will evolve into a network of hubs distributed throughout Bellevue. During the recent bomb cyclone power outages varied significantly across short distances. There is a need for clear communication about the locations of future hubs and planning that anticipates a variety of emergencies, including windstorms and wildfires. Colin Munson confirmed that the pilot model is intended to evaluate long-term scalability. Future hubs could be implemented in partnership with community organizations, not just on municipal properties, to ensure accessibility and equity.

Commissioner Ferris raised concerns about requiring developers to build electric vehicle infrastructure based solely on current technology. There is a need for adaptability given that advancements such as wireless charging pads could soon render the current infrastructure obsolete. The staff were urged to consider flexible requirements that enable EV readiness without mandating fixed systems that may become outdated.

Vice Chair Khanloo urged the replacement of words like “identify” with more decisive directives such as “implement,” particularly in regard to environmental justice and air quality near upzoned areas. By way of personal experience, the Commissioner noted living in a residential complex of 164 units that has no EV chargers. Residents often resort to inconvenient or costly alternatives due to insufficient infrastructure. Many homeowners associations lack the funds to retrofit their properties, and having stronger city requirements during the permitting phase could help prevent shortfalls in the future. A stronger urgency and accountability is needed to avoid repeating past delays.

Chair Goepple voiced appreciation for the city’s increased focus on climate resilience, but concern was raised about the city’s grid capacity, especially as the city grows and faces more extreme weather. Both the electrical and water systems need to be strengthened in order to meet the increased demand. Reliance on snowpack for water storage is becoming increasingly unreliable due to changing climate patterns. The city was urged to pursue additional water storage strategies and to prepare drainage systems for more intense storm events. The increased density that is encouraged by recent Comprehensive Plan amendments will require major stormwater infrastructure upgrades. Colin Munson said a grid capacity study has already been commissioned by the City Council and is underway. Although the study is in its early stages and does not yet have finalized recommendations, a draft strategy related to it has been included in the stewardship plan. The Commission will be kept updated with regard to relevant updates and materials as the study progresses.

Commissioner Kennedy added support for focusing on electric grid resilience. An interest was expressed in reviewing the grid capacity study once it is available given the importance of maintaining Bellevue’s reliability for residents and for business attraction. The Commissioner agreed with the comments from other commissioners in support of EV infrastructure expansion and asked for any recommendations from staff on how the Commission could help facilitate the work.

Commissioner Kennedy asked about permitting processes for backup generators and how critical infrastructure might be supported during outages, and an interest was expressed in understanding how green building and sustainable land use strategies, particularly those addressing embodied carbon, will come before the Commission for implementation. Thara Johnson confirmed that strategies resulting in land use code amendments will be routed through the Commission, but any

building code amendments will follow a separate process. The current functional plan is directly linked to the implementation of the Comprehensive Plan. Once direction is provided by City Council, staff will initiate follow-up actions in the appropriate jurisdiction, including Commission review when applicable.

****BREAK****

(8:24 p.m.)

C. Critical Areas Ordinance (CAO) Land Use Code Amendments (LUCA)
(8:30 p.m.)

A motion to extend the meeting to 9:30 p.m. was made by Commissioner Ferris. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Lu and the motion carried unanimously.

Code and Policy Planning Manager Kristina Gallant said the Critical Areas Ordinance regulates development in areas deemed environmentally sensitive, such as wetlands, streams, steep slopes, and other designated critical areas. The code is facing its first substantial update in several years and the work must be completed by the end of 2025 per state law.

Code and Policy Senior Planner Kirsten Mandt reminded the Commissioners at the May 28 study session the key themes raised included public support for daylighting piped streams, particularly in urban areas; improving data processing and GIS accuracy for site-specific updates; and enhancing habitat buffer standards for slopes, wetlands, and waterways. Additional questions were asked about reasonable use exceptions; top-of-bank versus ordinary high water mark to delineate the edge of a stream; climate change impacts; wetlands and water quality; and additional stream flexibilities.

Kirsten Mandt said the gap analysis was focused on analyzing the existing critical areas regulations and looking for gaps. The tools utilized to find the gaps included best available science, and the Growth Management Act. The Department of Ecology is the jurisdictions body that oversees critical areas and shorelines regulations. Within the gap analysis there were three categories for identifying potential gaps: overall clarity, ease of use, and consistency.

The key components of the update include reasonable use exceptions; Site Potential Tree Height (SPTH) and Riparian Management Zones (RMZ) top-of-bank vs. ordinary high water mark; wetland buffers; steep slopes; and the development density and intensity factor, which is a component of the current overlay.

At its core, reasonable use exceptions are a tool to approve limited use and disturbance of critical areas where there is no reasonable alternative. The tool avoids what amounts to an economic taking of property, allowing for some use on properties that are entirely encumbered. The current code includes highly complex and detailed criteria based on zoning, use, and development size. The proposal is to simply and consolidate the criteria for reasonable use; and to consider how to address the new minimum densities for middle housing. Reasonable use exceptions are very site specific.

Kirsten Mandt said the Site Potential Tree Height establishes the potential average and maximum tree height in a forested condition after 200 years based on soil type. It looks at healthy soils versus less healthy soils and the ability of the soil to support certain types of trees which grow to certain heights. The Site Potential Tree Height then informs the Riparian Management Zones, which is the area adjacent to rivers and streams that could provide the potential for riparian

functions. The approach is based on new guidance from the Washington Department of Fish and Wildlife. It does not rely on the traditional typology of streams that comes from the Department of Natural Resources and which prioritizes fish-bearing streams over things like perennial streams. The focus is on protecting the water quality of streams systemwide. While the method offers ecological benefits, there are potential equity concerns and significant implementation hurdles. Many areas, especially in BelRed, could see buffer requirements double from current widths, and that may limit redevelopment and inadvertently discourage stream restoration efforts. Mapping the gaps and the absence of official ordinance templates make adoption of the model more complex.

Kirsten Mandt explained that Bellevue currently uses Top of Bank, a more rare and less widely understood measure that often results in larger buffers. The recommendation of staff is to transition to the more widely accepted “Ordinary High Water Mark” method, which is used by most jurisdictions and which aligns with professional and agency standards. Ordinary High Water Mark is based on in-field physical observations made by wetlands biologists or other professionals.

The Commissioners were informed that no big changes are foreseen in regard to the wetland buffers and how they are typed and categorized. The buffers are established to protect the functions and values of wetlands and the associated habitat. The wetland category and habitat score come together to determine the buffer. The Department of Ecology is moving toward larger buffers for degraded conditions, but smaller buffers can be utilized in conjunction with infill mitigation planting. The proposed improvements include simplifying the setback requirements, establishing vegetation standards, integrating habitat corridors, and updating the mitigation ratios. The goal is to ensure functional buffers, even if they are narrower, provided they are properly vegetated and ecologically effective.

For steep slopes, Kirsten Mandt said the primary issue with the current code is that the definitions are overly broad and capture more areas than intended. The current code treats all steep slopes as potential landslide hazards, even those that are man-made or do not present significant risks. The proposal is to revise the definition, introduce erosion control standards, and allowing for modifications outside of the critical area review when appropriate. The objective is to ensure genuine hazard areas receive necessary protections while removing unnecessary regulatory barriers for safe development.

With regard to the development density/intensity factor, Kirsten Mandt explained that under the current code any site within the critical areas overlay for which some type of development is proposed must show how the density/intensity factor will be met. It is based on the portion of critical areas to the developable areas on the site. The reduction factor is based on that ratio and is applied either to the dwelling units per acre yield for the FAR. While originally intended to balance development and environmental preservation, it no longer appears to serve a functional purpose. Most projects must already meet buffer, setback, and protection requirements, regardless of the factor. The suggestion of staff is to remove it to simplify the process.

The community workshops and information sessions to date have included a booth at Earthfest, an in-person open house, and direct engagement with the public. The topics of greatest concern included the use and development of best available science, water quality protections, tree preservation, restoration of degraded buffers, balancing environmental regulations with housing goals, and coordination with tribal and neighboring jurisdictions. The list of upcoming outreach events includes a virtual “lunch and learn” on July 7, a public draft release in mid-July, and a virtual public information session in early August. A Council check-in is slated for July, there

will be ongoing study sessions with the Commission, and a public hearing will be scheduled for October.

Commissioner Villaveces expressed strong support for the proposed approach of allowing multiple residential units within the same development footprint under a reasonable use exception. Most environmental impact is derived from the footprint itself, not from the number of units. The case-by-case approach remains the most appropriate. With regard to steep slopes, the approach should include construction methods such as building on stilts, especially on human-made slopes. Such designs are minimally invasive and environmentally efficient, particularly in complex development areas. A strong endorsement was voiced for the proposed removal of artificial density limitations on properties affected by critical areas. Development feasibility is inherently constrained by physical site conditions, and density restrictions are redundant.

Commissioner Villaveces said the most critical issue is the absence of performance-based design standards in the proposal. Kirsten Mandt said focusing entirely on performance can get tricky in terms of consistency with the Department of Ecology and in terms of predictability and implementation. There are options such as incentivizing vegetation and stream daylighting that can reflect performance-oriented outcomes. Commissioner Villaveces suggested that excluding performance-based options could severely hinder housing development, especially in the BelRed area. Various examples were highlighted, including from Yonkers, Singapore, and Bogotá's Parque El Virrey, along with successful cases in Seattle, Portland, Philadelphia, and Copenhagen. Those jurisdictions have adopted hybrid or performance-based approaches that balance ecological preservation with development needs. Staff was urged not to dismiss such strategies in light of the importance of offering flexible compliance paths for complex sites.

Commissioner Kennedy asked if the city had benchmarked its Critical Areas Ordinance updates against other jurisdictions, as was done in regard to the Economic Development Plan. Kirsten Mandt explained that the comparisons had primarily focused on similar cities in western Washington such as Bothell, Sammamish, and Woodinville due to having shared environmental conditions and the same state regulatory requirements. Bellevue's consultants are familiar with local best practices and they helped identify code language from those cities as models. Commissioner Kennedy encouraged staff to look beyond just Washington State and suggested that additional insights could be gleaned from cities with similar growth and development pressures.

Commissioner Kennedy asked how the proposed changes align with the policy intent behind the original protections, specifically the scientific rationale behind removing the development density factor and switching from "top of bank" to "ordinary high water mark" for stream edge measurement. Kirsten Mandt explained that all development projects in critical areas must comply with mitigation sequencing to ensure no net loss of ecological function. The best available science outlines multiple valid methods for protecting resources, and the proposed changes represent a selection from those methods that best fit Bellevue's context. The gap analysis evaluates the city's current code against the scientific guidance and recommends modifications based on both ecological integrity and development feasibility.

Commissioner Lu echoed support for performance-based design and framed the discussion in the context of climate resilience, emphasizing that development often acts as a catalyst for environmental restoration, especially on small or oddly shaped lots. The city should leverage development to support both restoration and ecological resilience, particularly in areas like BelRed. While recognizing the appeal of standardized buffer widths, what is needed is more

flexibility and strategic restoration as part of the regulatory framework.

Commissioner Lu also raised a question about integration with the city's recently updated tree code and asked if there might be opportunities to incentivize tree planting or mitigation efforts within critical areas as a way to enhance both slope stability and overall ecological health. Kirsten Mandt responded by noting that the critical areas code contains separate tree protection rules. Cutting down trees within critical areas buffers typically requires mitigation. It might be possible to consider voluntary tree planting or reforestation as a mitigation tool, though more exploration would be needed.

Commissioner Nilchian agreed with the comments made by Commissioner Villaveces. With regard to the top of bank vs the high water mark standards, the question asked was what kind of actual effect switching over to the OHWM standard might have. Kirsten Mandt said every ravine, stream or waterway is different. Not every critical area has a floodplain or a steep slope. By and large, the OHWM approach is likely to yield a wider waterway from which to measure. Under either methodology, the focus is on protecting the functions and values of critical areas through mitigation sequencing.

Commissioner Nilchian expressed support for the proposal to allow multiple housing units within the same footprint under reasonable use exceptions, recognizing the approach a means to encourage development while minimizing environmental disturbance. Support was also voiced for removing the density intensity requirement, especially since it appears to have minimal practical impact. Simplification of the code should be the goal.

Commissioner Ferris expressed broad support for the proposed updates then asked how the city intends to balance the preservation of stream buffers against the need to incentivize redevelopment, particularly when stream daylighting could serve both ecological and community purposes. Kirsten Mandt acknowledged the tensions and indicated that the strategies under review include flexible buffer configurations through buffer averaging, infill vegetation mitigation, and potential FAR incentives for developers who agree to daylight streams. It was emphasized that redevelopment often provides the best opportunity for ecological restoration and successful models from other cities are being examined to guide Bellevue's approach.

Vice Chair Khanloo expressed general agreement with the proposed code changes, underscored the importance of ensuring equity in buffer considerations, and reaffirmed support for limiting impacts on critical areas through reasonable use exceptions, provided that the development footprint does not expand.

Chair Goepple affirmed the importance of grounding the update in best available science while ensuring that the outcome does not impose excessive constraints on development. The question asked was whether the overall effect of the update will be more restrictive or more flexible. Kirsten Mandt confirmed that the goal, as guided by City Council, is to make the code less restrictive, especially through targeted changes such as reforming the steep slope standards, removing the density intensity calculation, and implementing incentive strategies for ecological improvements.

Chair Goepple voiced support for the use of performance-based design models and reiterated earlier comments made by Commissioners favoring greater regulatory flexibility.

Chair Goepple expressed concern about the complexity and potential unintended consequences of using "site potential tree height" to calculate stream buffer widths. The marginal

environmental benefits may not justify the added complexity and potential burden on development. Kirsten Mandt allowed having the same concern and noted that the staff are actively evaluating whether the model offers sufficient benefit. The methodology, while promoted by some state agencies, is still under discussion and will be reviewed further with the consultants.

Commissioner Villaveces suggested the city should not measure success solely in terms of environmental restoration or stream protection. In areas like BelRed, success must also include the creation of public space and economic development, particularly housing. The city has invested in light rail infrastructure in BelRed to support density, and planning decisions should reflect that vision. The staff were encouraged to approach BelRed's streams through a lens that integrates ecological restoration, public benefit, and development potential. Kirsten Mandt said a specific FAR reduction that is currently applicable in BelRed under the development intensity calculation is being considered for removal in support of the development goals.

Commissioner Lu suggested integrating educational and public engagement elements into the critical area preservation strategies. Developers could be incentivized to install interpretive signage or visual representations of preserved wetlands and wildlife, which would simultaneously fulfill public amenity goals and promote environmental education.

9. OTHER BUSINESS- None
(9:20 p.m.)

10. APPROVAL OF MINUTES
(9:20 p.m.)

- A. May 14, 2025
- B. May 28, 2025

A motion to approve both sets of minutes was made by Commissioner Villaveces. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Nilchian and the motion carried unanimously.

11. EXECUTIVE SESSION – None
(9:21 p.m.)

12. ADJOURNMENT
(9:21 p.m.)

A motion to adjourn was made by Commissioner Ferris. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Villaveces and the motion carried unanimously.

Chair Goepple adjourned the meeting at 9:21 p.m.



Teun Deuling
Staff to Planning Commission

July 24, 2025
Date