

Bellevue City Council Retreat
February 26-27, 2026
Hotel Bellwether, Bellingham, WA
Retreat Report

Participants:

Councilmembers: Mayor Mo Malakoutian, Deputy Mayor Dave Hamilton, Vishal Bhargava, Naren Briar, Jared Nieuwenhuis, Lynne Robinson, Claire Sumadiwirya

Staff¹: Diane Carlson, Nathan McCommon, Joe Todd, Genesee Adkins, and Charmaine Arredondo.

Facilitators: Carrie Heron and Kara de Maine, Heartwood Collective

Desired Outcomes:

- Form as a new team, building trust and communication
- Celebrate the council's accomplishments in 2025
- Look forward at the opportunities ahead for 2026 (and beyond)
- Explore some of the key components of an effective city council
- Review council norms and processes to ensure a shared understanding

Thursday, February 26	
Outcome/Activity	
8:30 – 10:00am	<p>Opening of Retreat, Day 1</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Opening comments from city manager - Facilitators introduced themselves - Outcomes/Agenda/Parking lot process review - Context-setting (how this is different from council meetings; how we shaped the agenda) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Interview and survey themes (what we will/won't address at retreat) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Share poster with themes – acknowledge where things integrated into agenda ▪ Two goals: council forming as a team and also council and staff working together effectively; mix of participation in different sections ○ Shared the hand model of brain / Settling Practices

¹ Andrew Singelakis, John Resha and Mark Poch attended the meeting on February 26 from 1 – 2 pm.

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Discussed getting on the balcony level; used altitude visual to demonstrate appropriate leveling - Developed retreat agreements - Excused staff (except city manager and city clerk) - Lines activity - Shared responses to questions in pairs; each councilmember talked to other councilmembers in rotation - Debriefed the activity: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Discussed what surprised councilmembers during this activity and how they can apply the learnings to support the success of the retreat.
10:00 – 10:15	Break
10:15 – 11:15am	<p>Discussed forming as a new team, building trust and communication and began exploring some of the key components of an effective city council.</p> <p>Set-up:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Opportunity to co-create a picture of what the ideal version of an effective council looks like. - Reviewed the various roles council has. <p>Councilmembers used image and metaphor cards from the facilitators to create a shared vision for the council.</p> <p>Councilmembers discussed the importance of working together. They each shared the cards they chose and why.</p> <p>Group discussion around what would support the council’s success (living out the vision). Councilmembers also discussed collaboration with staff.</p> <p>Councilmembers again used image and metaphor cards to describe the council’s current state:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Discussion around how the council is functioning today - What’s working well? Where are there opportunities to improve?
11:15 – noon	<p>Celebrated the council’s accomplishments in 2025 <i>and</i> looked forward at the opportunities ahead for 2026 (and beyond)</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - 2025 accomplishments review <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Made significant accomplishments (see annual report), all the good work comes from council’s direction ○ Roadmap - 2025 Annual Report, Vision to Execution, 2026 Council Calendar look-ahead - Debrief highlights: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Reviewed what accomplishments were most exciting for councilmembers. - Previewed what work is ahead in 2026, organized by target areas <ul style="list-style-type: none"> ○ Council will have a budget process workshop in April

12:00 – 1:00pm	Lunch break
1:00 – 2:00	Continued discussion regarding opportunities ahead for 2026 (and beyond) <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Staff shared information about inflection points in city history where significant policy direction guided growth and development supported by infrastructure investment - Staff also reviewed high level fiscal trends and investment area needs to support anticipated growth with a focus on transportation needs and revenue options, which was identified last year as essential to address in 2026 - This will be part of the budget workshop in April.
2:00 – 3:00	Continued exploring some of the key components of an effective city council Participated in a constructive conflict activity designed by facilitators <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Collaboration – How to be effective when listening to each other and trying to find compromise Notes/highlights from activity: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Councilmembers reflected on what they learned about conflict from their family and culture, and in pairs shared one or two ideas from the Conflict Tips Sheet that they wanted to put into practice.
3:00 – 3:15pm	Break
3:15 - 4:00pm	Discussed forming as a new team, building trust and communication and explored more of the key components of an effective city council Councilmembers took a walk in groups of 2 or 3 and reflected on everything that was covered today and whether there were any lingering questions or issues. Large group debrief followed.
4:00 – 4:30pm	Closing, Day 1 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Review parking lot and next steps - Plus/Delta exercise
Friday, Feb. 27	
Outcome/Activity	
8:30 – 9:00am	Opening, Day 2 <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Overnight reflections and highlights - Reviewed outcomes/agenda/parking lot - Reviewed agreements
9:00 – 10:15am	Explored more of the key components of an effective city council Zing Rounds - Council worked in small groups to surface perspectives on topics from the pre-retreat survey <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Effective council meetings - Shared understanding of “no surprises” norm - Guidelines for Appointed Council Liaisons to Boards and Commissions

10:00– 10:15am	Break
10:15 - 11:00	<p>Zing Rounds</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Effective council meetings <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Discussion of what is working well and what could be even better. - Shared understanding of “no surprises” norm <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Discussion of what “no surprises” means and how councilmembers can effectively work together, along with staff, to ensure awareness of items - Guidelines for Appointed Council Liaisons for Boards and Commissions <ul style="list-style-type: none"> o Discussion of roles as individual liaisons and how to interact with board and commissions to reinforce council direction
11:00 – 11:30	<p>Review and address survey parking lot items</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Budget fundamentals - Discussion of third-party review of permitting process - Mid-point touchpoint for board/commission work
11:30 – noon	<p>Closing</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Review retreat parking lot and next steps - Appreciations and closing thoughts - Highlights
12:00	Retreat adjourned