

CITY COUNCIL AGENDA TOPIC

Study Session on a Bellevue City Code Amendment to update the sign code consistent with legal requirements and contemporary sign design techniques.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**INFORMATION
ONLY**

This study session serves as a mid-point check-in and briefing on outreach to date, along with other relevant updates since the project was launched in August 2024. While staff are not seeking formal direction or action, they will be seeking input from the City Council on their priorities for the project scope.

RECOMMENDATION

N/A

BACKGROUND/ANALYSIS**Background**

In 2015, the Supreme Court decided *Reed v. Town of Gilbert*, which reaffirmed that all sign regulations must be content neutral but changed the test for determining whether a regulation is content neutral. The court has dictated that the content of the sign generally may not be regulated and, importantly, that signs of the same type generally may not be regulated differently based on the content of the sign. For example, the City generally may not regulate a temporary directional sign differently than a temporary political sign or regulate a freestanding church sign differently than a freestanding political sign. Both temporary signs and freestanding signs are examples of sign types, while the other distinctions noted are examples of content which generally cannot be used as the basis for variations within one sign type. In other words, all sign types at a given location must now generally be treated the same, regardless of content.

In addition to the legal requirements, the sign code update will provide the City with an opportunity to ensure the provisions of the code meet the needs of the community and allow for contemporary sign design, technology, and construction methods. Both the public and city staff have identified difficulties interpreting and administering the code and the update will look to simplify and streamline the code while ensuring the design desires of the community are upheld.

Proposed Scope of Sign Code Amendments

To ensure compliance with past legal decisions and to streamline and simplify the code, the project will require a complete rewrite of the existing code and establishment of a new Chapter 22.10. An outline of this new Chapter 22.10 Bellevue City Code (BCC) is provided as Attachment A. This Bellevue City Code Amendment (BCCA) is a cross-departmental effort between Development Services, Transportation, Community Development, and the City Attorney's Office. Staff are working with the

City's Economic Development team and business community to ensure that the form and design standards of the sign code are updated to meet their needs and can accommodate contemporary sign design techniques.

As the updates are required to be content neutral, the BCCA will focus on setting form, location, and lighting standards for distinct sign types (e.g.: freestanding signs, wall signs, directional signs). These standards will apply uniformly across all signs of a single type in a given land use district. Temporary signs will also require new standards to establish the time period they are allowed to be displayed. Staff are working with the community to ensure that the size and form standards meet the needs of businesses and aesthetic desires of the greater community.

Public Engagement

The sign code update project includes two main phases of outreach. Phase one is titled "listening, fundamentals, and early code development" and focused on (1) expanding project awareness, (2) sharing project objectives, and (3) gathering community perspectives on project priorities. Following this study session, staff will begin phase two titled "reviewing and drafting" where outreach be broad and include public information sessions and follow-up with stakeholders as the code draft becomes available. Staff have completed all planned Phase One engagement activities. These activities are outlined below. A detailed phase one engagement summary report that includes common themes across all engagement completed to date is provided as Attachment B.

Online Presence

A project webpage was created to provide the public information about the sign code update, who to direct questions to, opportunities to engage, and how to submit comments. To keep engagement participants informed on how their feedback supported the project, staff shared the engagement summary report to the project webpage in early November. Throughout the life of the project, staff will continually update the webpage with additional opportunities to engage and with general updates on project progress.

Sign Code Questionnaire

A questionnaire was widely distributed to gather input on priorities for the project scope as a broad outreach tactic to Bellevue's community. The questionnaire was hosted on Engaging Bellevue and available in Bellevue's most commonly spoken languages including English, Traditional Chinese, Simplified Chinese, Spanish, Korean, Russian, Japanese, and Vietnamese to encourage maximum participation. Questionnaire responses were collected from March 2025 through June 2025 and gathered a total of 130 responses. One of the key priorities that emerged from the questionnaire data is the community's desire to regulate temporary signage, especially in Bellevue's residential zones. Many expressed concerns that these temporary signs lead to visual clutter and are often abandoned to become litter and trash. Outside of residential areas, participants confirmed that sign visibility is crucial for business viability – especially when it comes to advertising small businesses. In general, most participants understand the need for signage but request that the updated sign code regulations capture the community's needs and priorities with the right balance of regulation and enforcement. All the data and charts from the questionnaire are available in Appendix A of Attachment B.

Stakeholder Listening Sessions

Six listening session were held with residents, sign industry professionals, and the business and

development community. Additional listening sessions were conducted internally with city staff across departments and divisions including land use, transportation, economic development, code compliance, and community development. These groups were predicted to be the most impacted, have input to share, and were likely to follow the project closely. All meetings were virtual and began with a brief presentation introducing the project, after the presentation attendees were invited to share any concerns or desires for the update. In all stakeholder conversations, both internal and external, one common theme was consistent throughout – there is a desire for the code to be simplified and streamlined for ease of understanding and use.

Direct Engagement

Staff have received direct comments and questions from a number of individuals by email and phone. The engagement summary report (Attachment B) includes the feedback received as direct dialogue from residents, businesses, developers, and sign advocates. Staff also had direct engagement with the Bellevue Development Committee by presenting at their April meeting.

City Newsletter Updates

The launch of the project, any subsequent updates, and opportunities to engage have been advertised in the quarterly Development Services newsletters, neighborhood news, and features in the Community and Economic Developments monthly newsletters. The sign code questionnaire was advertised widely using all of these newsletter platforms. Staff will continue to use the city newsletters as a method for additional outreach and project updates throughout the life of this project.

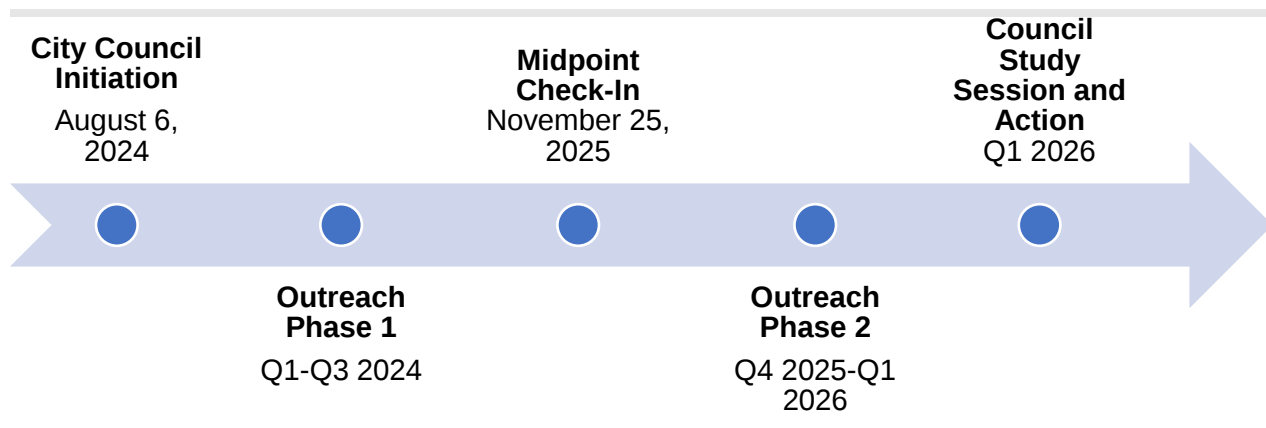
Next Steps

Based on the feedback gathered in phase 1, staff have prepared a draft sign code BCCA outline (Attachment A). Following this study session, staff will move into phase 2 of the project, reviewing and drafting. Based on engagement from phase 1 and council guidance this evening, staff will begin to draft a new sign code based on the outline provided.

Outreach and engagement efforts will continue in phase 2 and include follow-up with stakeholders from phase 1, continued broad community outreach with project updates, and public information sessions once a draft is released to share the new sign code and answer questions.

Staff plan to return for another study session with City Council in early Q1 2026 with a full draft sign code. At that meeting, staff will seek input and direction from Council to finalize the updated sign code and bring it back for final action.

Project Timeline



POLICY & FISCAL IMPACTS

Policy Impact

The BCCA will amend the Bellevue City Code. The amendments will be consistent with the Comprehensive Plan, specifically the Urban Design element and the completed Retail Study.

Fiscal Impact

N/A – information only

OPTIONS

N/A

ATTACHMENTS

- A. Sign Code Draft BCCA Outline
- B. Phase 1 Engagement Summary Report – Sign Code BCCA

AVAILABLE IN COUNCIL LIBRARY

N/A