

CITY COUNCIL AGENDA TOPIC

Grand Connection Program update, including crossing over I-405 and vision for public spaces along the corridor.

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY**INFORMATION
ONLY**

The Grand Connection Program is a multi-department effort to better connect and integrate more than 1.5 miles of people-oriented places between Bellevue's Downtown and Wilburton neighborhoods. Over the coming year, there will be many opportunities for the community to engage, including to give feedback on a new, signature crossing of I-405 and creative new uses of public space along the corridor to enhance community connection and celebration.

RECOMMENDATION

N/A

BACKGROUND/ANALYSIS

In 2023, the City relaunched the Grand Connection Program as a multi-department effort to create 1.5 miles of interconnected, people-focused spaces stretching across Bellevue's Downtown and Wilburton neighborhoods. The program includes a series of projects and initiatives featuring new buildings and public spaces from Eastrail to City Hall Plaza with the most high-profile element being the crossing of I-405. The overall program, along with redevelopment of the Wilburton commercial area, will solidify central Bellevue as a hub for our diverse, innovative community. Once complete, more than half a million Eastside residents will have easier access to downtown Bellevue and more opportunities to celebrate and connect once they arrive.

In the near-term, the City's goals are as follows:

- Reach 30 percent design on the Grand Connection Crossing by the end of 2024.
- Advance contributing projects, such as Eastrail and Meydenbauer Bay Park Phase 2, while ensuring forward compatibility.
- Assist in the creation of an external partner organization to support the Grand Connection program in the long-term.
- Increase programming and amenities in existing public spaces leading to a long-term operations and programming plan for the full route.

Over the past year, in pursuit of this vision, City staff have made considerable progress on the 30 percent design and engineering for the Grand Connection Crossing, advanced contributing projects, supported the creation of the external Friends of the Grand Connection group, and begun planning for long-term operations of the route. Through the end of 2024, the project will cross significant milestones, like determining the Type, Size, and Location (TSL) for the crossing, to help us reach 30 percent design. Staff will provide Council an outline of key decision points in Q2.

This memo provides an update on each of these City goals and the significant work and decision-making to come.

Grand Connection Crossing

Late in 2023, the City launched work on 30 percent design of the *Bellevue Grand Connection: I-405 Crossing – Downtown to Eastrail* project, which will construct a landmark pedestrian- and bicycle-oriented crossing of I-405. On September 11, 2023, Council approved a contract with a consultant team led by WSP to perform this work, with support from LMN Architects, Cooper Robertson, PRR, and others.

Pending alternatives analysis, the crossing may be a series of spans connecting redevelopment sites along the route, creating a cohesive zone filled with restaurants, retail, plazas, and other amenities. Currently, the staff and consultant team are developing early environmental documentation, launching site studies for geotechnical analysis, and beginning to craft possible design scenarios.

Over the coming months, there will be multiple opportunities for public input and engagement. The team recently closed the first online open house focused on design principles and formal consultation required for environmental processes. Additional engagement opportunities are outlined below, with each presented in Bellevue’s top eight languages and promoted via additional channels, such as the Community Development Department’s cultural outreach assistants.

Approximate Date	Milestone
December 2023 (Complete)	Design workshop with City staff, major stakeholders, and consultant teams.
February-March 2024	Online open house to gather feedback on design principles, ideas, and project purpose and need.
April-May 2024	In-person open house to gather feedback on design alternatives.
Summer 2024	Select a preferred design alternative for further design development and refinement.
Summer-Fall 2024	Refine preferred design alternative and begin 30% design and engineering documentation.

At present, the project is on-track for completion of a 30 percent design for the crossing by the end of 2024. However, to meet our aggressive goal to complete the project by the end of 2028, the City must plan to roll directly from 30 percent to final design with minimal to no gap in progress.

Funding and Cost

Work on 30 percent design for the Grand Connection Crossing is fully funded by a \$2.5 million contribution from Amazon and approximately \$3.6 million in City CIP funds, including the design contract and staff time.

A complete estimate for remaining design costs and ultimate construction is included in the 30 percent design scope. To help the City and its private partners prepare and meet aggressive timelines for completion of the crossing, the City will be working with a consultant this year to analyze the variety of options for fully funding the crossing's construction. More information on the refined cost estimates and funding options will be available by the end of 2024.

Contributing Projects

Over the past year, the City has marked several milestones on capital investment projects which contribute to the Grand Connection vision:

- **Piloti and NE Corner of Downtown Park:** In 2023, the City completed a landmark public art installation, *Piloti*, at the northeast corner of Downtown Park. Piloti Plaza features additional seating and a water feature, and for the first time connects the park with the prominent intersection of NE 4th and Bellevue Way.
- **Private Redevelopment:** The corridor is benefitting from recent property renovations and redevelopments by Unico, Vulcan Real Estate, and Amazon. Local and national food and entertainment concepts will soon increase activity at Compass Plaza and Vulcan's large pavilion at the 555 Building. Amazon's Bellevue 600 site next to the Transit Center will add further food and retail options when it opens in 2025.
- **Raised Intersections:** In October 2023, the City's contractors completed new raised intersections at NE 6th and 110th and 108th Aves NE. These crossings enhance pedestrian safety at two of the busiest crossings along the Grand Connection in advance of the opening of Sound Transit's 2 Line later this spring.
- **Eastrail:** In fall 2023, the City and King County finalized the *Wilburton Framework Plan*, a strategy for development of the Eastrail corridor in the Wilburton neighborhood. Funding is secure for this section of the trail. Work remains to identify funding to complete the trail over I-90.
- **Planning for Phase 2 of Meydenbauer Bay Park:** In fall 2023, Parks and Community Services launched the planning process for the second phase of Meydenbauer Bay Park, the western terminus for the Grand Connection. There will be numerous opportunities for public engagement over the next year.

In total, the City has invested over **\$35 million** to date in Grand Connection capital projects with more to come over the next several years.

Friends of the Grand Connection

The Friends of the Grand Connection (FOGC) group formally launched in 2023 with Pearl Leung of Amazon and Patrick Bannon of the Bellevue Downtown Association (BDA) serving as the

organization's initial co-chairs. The group includes property owners, major employers, and community leaders, and will support private-sector advocacy, fundraising, and programming for the entire route with an initial focus on fundraising for the I-405 crossing design.

Additionally, a broad coalition of over a dozen organizations, including the KidsQuest Children's Museum, Bellevue Chamber, and Sound Transit are formal Organizational Partners of the Friends of the Grand Connection aligned in support of the crossing project.

Operations, Programming, and Management

Operations and Programming

Since 2018, the City has been partnering with the BDA on activation and programming, like "al fresco" dining in Old Bellevue, distinctive yellow lanterns, and summertime seating along the Grand Connection corridor. This spring, the City will launch a new operations and programming contract with the BDA, allowing it to hire a dedicated public space staffer for the first time.

Additionally, over the past several years, Community Development has assisted external event organizers and piloted small-scale programs to gauge public interest. For example, in May 2023, the City celebrated the grand opening of Piloti, a new signature art installation in Downtown Park. To mark the occasion, Parks and Community Development staff planned a series of programs, including live music, performers, and giveaways in the plaza. In September 2023, the City assisted the Old Bellevue Merchants' Association (OBMA) in opening Main Street to pedestrians to support that organization's Wine Walk. Finally, in December, Community Development and Transportation teams supported a night market on New Years' Eve in Old Bellevue. Each well-attended program garnered positive feedback and aligns with the Grand Connection objective to better active and program public spaces across downtown.

We expect this work to continue in 2024 and beyond.

Public Space Permitting

In 2023, staff reviewed the City's existing public space permitting processes to better understand how the Grand Connection corridor could be programmed by external organizations. The team has used this information to create new resources for public space applicants, including application guides to assist small businesses in obtaining the most frequently requested permits, like Outdoor Dining and Holiday Lights. In a similar vein, in fall 2023, Community Development co-organized a street closure on Main Street to understand how these types of events are currently permitted and to identify potential process improvements.

An in-depth review of our operations, programming, and public space management work will come before Council later this year.

Looking Ahead

In the coming months, the City and its consultant teams will continue to advance work on the 30 percent design and engineering of the Grand Connection Crossing, a formal funding and financing plan, and public space management along the entire corridor. Additional work will include construction along

Eastrail, continued planning for Meydenbauer Bay Park Phase 2, and various small capital projects along the corridor.

Staff will be conducting additional community and Council engagement on the following topics in the next several months:

- Grand Connection Crossing design – alternatives analysis
- Public space management and activation
- Funding development through the 2025-26 budget process

POLICY & FISCAL IMPACTS

Policy Impact

The Grand Connection was first adopted as a City Council priority in 2012.

Over the years, the City Council has approved a number of policies and documents relating to the program, including the *Grand Connection Framework Plan – Sequence 1* (which includes the section of the corridor between City Hall and Meydenbauer Bay) in 2017 and *Sequence 2* (which includes the section between City Hall and Eastrail) in 2018. The first significant land use code updates supporting the vision were adopted in 2021.

Public space activation and management work is also supported by policies in the *Economic Development Plan*, the *Destination Development Plan*, and the *Comprehensive Plan*.

Fiscal Impact

Work on 30 percent design for the Grand Connection Crossing project is fully funded by a \$2.5 million contribution from Amazon and approximately \$3.6 million in City CIP funds, including the design contract and staff time. Further design and construction will require collaboration across federal, state, local, and private individual and corporate philanthropic supporters.

Public space activation and management work is currently supported in part by a CIP fund specifically dedicated to implementation of the Grand Connection.

OPTIONS

N/A

ATTACHMENTS

N/A

AVAILABLE IN COUNCIL LIBRARY

Grand Connection Framework Plan – Sequence 1

Grand Connection Framework Plan – Sequence 2