

CITY COUNCIL STUDY SESSION

Placemaking through partnerships in Downtown Bellevue: Report on Grand Connection activation pilot with the Bellevue Downtown Association.

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DIRECTION NEEDED FROM COUNCIL**INFORMATION
ONLY**

This is a co-presentation from Community Development Department staff and the Bellevue Downtown Association providing an overview of the summer 2019 Grand Connection activation pilot in Downtown Bellevue. The presentation will provide a recap of the project's genesis, goals and outcomes, and highlight the partnership approach to placemaking behind its success.

RECOMMENDATION

N/A

BACKGROUND & ANALYSIS

Ensuring Bellevue's commercial districts and neighborhoods echo a strong sense of place and character authentic to the City is critical to attracting residents, employers, employees, and visitors. In recognition of this interdependency between placemaking and economic development, the City Council has provided strong policy direction and guidance supporting the expansion of placemaking tools, initiatives and best practices throughout many of the City's adopted plans and strategies.

In the City's 2014-adopted Economic Development Plan, "cultivating attractive and diverse business districts" and "continuing to make Bellevue a great place to live and visit" are established as foundational strategies deeply connected to the long-term success of the City and its economy. These strategies speak to the need for new and targeted investments in the public realm that continue to shape areas like Downtown Bellevue into dynamic, walkable, energized, and activated environments with a clear sense of place. Similar strategies that emphasize investments in placemaking are found in the original Cultural Compass plan and 2017 City of Bellevue and Visit Bellevue Washington Destination Development Plan.

Perhaps the boldest Council-approved effort to facilitate and grow a strong sense of place in Bellevue is the 2017 adoption of the Grand Connection Framework Plan. The ultimate implementation of the plan

will be a transformational exercise in placemaking and will represent a signature and defining feature of the City's urban landscape.

Since the adoption of the Grand Connection Framework Plan, Community Development staff have been focused on bringing the vision to life through implementation of the plan's recommended next steps. Understanding that successful placemaking efforts require an incremental and iterative approach to achieving success, the plan proposes an immediate focus on early implementation strategies – tactical urbanism and pilot projects – that focus on programming and small-scale physical improvements that allow for the identity of the route to take shape. Additionally, the plan stresses the need to identify and develop partnerships to inform and support these projects.

With these recommended steps in mind, staff engaged the Bellevue Downtown Association (BDA) in January of 2019 to develop and implement a pilot placemaking project along the Grand Connection route. The BDA were a natural partner for piloting a new approach to placemaking in the public realm thanks to their experience with downtown events along the Grand Connection like Live at Lunch, Snowflake Lane, and the annual Arts Fair.

Over the next eight months, City staff worked collaboratively with the BDA to establish shared goals and assist with navigating City permits and processes. But it was outside of City Hall where the most important work would be done. Throughout the project, the BDA would spend an estimated 600 hours of staff time engaging property and business owners, inventorying existing conditions, installing and maintaining activations, marketing the project, surveying stakeholders, and recording lessons learned. In addition, with property owners and local businesses, the BDA leveraged in-kind donations of volunteer installation hours, maintenance assistance, and technical expertise to bring the project to life.

The result was a successful and exciting activation project spanning multiple blocks of the Grand Connection route. Most importantly though, the project proved a critical capacity building exercise in placemaking for the BDA and provided an essential roadmap for planning and executing placemaking projects that span multiple properties and segments of the Grand Connection. Tonight, the BDA is here to share a full report on the project, including their lessons learned.

POLICY & FISCAL IMPACTS

Policy Impact

Based on the best practice knowledge collected from an examination of other successful placemaking projects around the country and through the learnings gathered from the Grand Connection activation pilot, two key takeaways have emerged:

- Ground level implementation of placemaking activations in the public realm is critical, but challenging, tedious, and time-intensive work. It requires extensive relationship building with property owners, businesses and residents, and dedicated resources to be successful. Terms like “tactical urbanism” and “pilot project” inaccurately portray this work as quick, easy and light. Even the smallest of public realm activations requires skilled staff, time and money. As noted above, the BDA estimated over 600 hours of staff time was used to plan and implement this project alone.
- Cities that are truly committed to creating vibrant, active places don't do it alone. They rely on partnerships and invest in growing the capacity of local organizations to help support placemaking goals. This will be especially critical for the Grand Connection due to the fact that

the majority of the route consists of private property.

These key takeaways reinforce the recommendations and strategies found throughout the Grand Connection Framework Plan and other key Council-approved plans and policy documents. They also highlight the need for the City to accelerate its exploration and implementation of other public-private partnership approaches that support public policy goals. Understanding the roles and needs of the City's community-based partners (like the Bellevue Downtown Association) and how staff can assist in building their capacity is a major focus area within the current Economic Development Plan update.

Fiscal Impact

Bellevue supported the Grand Connection activation pilot with funds totaling \$32,000. Project funds were a combination of the City's economic development grant from the Port of Seattle (\$21,333) and from the Grand Connection CIP budget (\$10,667).

OPTIONS

N/A

ATTACHMENTS & AVAILABLE DOCUMENTS

A. Bellevue Downtown Association Grand Connection Activation Pilot Final Report

AVAILABLE IN COUNCIL LIBRARY

N/A