

CITY COUNCIL STUDY SESSION

Placemaking and small business support through partnerships in Downtown Bellevue: Report on the “Heart of Bellevue” recovery campaign 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 2020 “Heart of Bellevue” recovery campaign and associated activations. 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 evoke a strong sense of place and character authentic to the City helps to attract 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.

With this direction 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 result was a successful and exciting activation project spanning multiple blocks of the Grand Connection route. Most importantly, the project provided an important 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.

In order to build off of the success of the 2019 activation pilot, staff initiated conversations with the BDA in February of 2020 to begin planning for another placemaking activation over the summer. Shortly after planning discussions kicked off, the COVID-19 pandemic began to take hold, forcing a dramatic shift regarding the role of placemaking and rapidly changing needs of downtown stakeholders.

As the pandemic intensified through the spring, the breadth of the issues and challenges facing downtown businesses and the downtown economy overall came into focus. They included: prolonged closures of downtown businesses in compliance with Washington's stay-at-home order and capacity limitations mandated through the Safe Start reopening plan; decreased revenues due to consumer public health and safety concerns; decreased foot-traffic and consumer spending power due to prolonged remote work/work-from-home policies instituted by downtown employers; increased costs associated with maintaining social distancing requirements and personal protective equipment (PPE) needs; and decreased revenue associated with tourism and business travel.

Recognizing the need to redirect energy and resources to respond to the crisis, staff and the BDA worked collaboratively to adapt the scope of their 2020 placemaking efforts to include the following goals:

- Promote downtown offerings and support small businesses
- Drive an appropriate level of activity back to downtown
- Recover lost economic activity
- Build confidence that businesses are committed to reopening safely and responsibly
- Connect residents and other customers with Bellevue businesses
- Build connections and strengthen pathways for supporting downtown's small businesses

Over the next six months, the BDA successfully developed, launched and implemented a multi-faceted recovery campaign designed to connect, support and promote local business in Downtown Bellevue. Branded as the "Heart of Bellevue", the BDA's efforts have included:

- Extensive one-on-one, in-person engagement with more than 100 downtown small businesses
- Development of a multi-faceted print, online and social media marketing campaign that engages residents, workers, visitors, businesses and property owners to support the return of foot traffic and revitalization of economic activity needed for businesses to succeed upon reopening
- Interviews and profiles with Bellevue businesses and artists highlighting stories of activity, creativity and recovery in the community, including 103 businesses featured
- Execution of multiple placemaking activations with key properties and businesses, including lanterns and banners along the Grand Connection in the downtown core, and elevator ads, storefront posters and construction fencing wraps promoting the "Heart of Bellevue"
- Support for the Old Bellevue/Main Street outdoor dining activation through the "Heart of Bellevue Al Fresco" marketing program, as detailed on November 23
- Adaptation of arts and cultural programming for online/virtual audiences, including driving an average of more than 1,000 online views per event for 39 virtual concerts

Tonight, the BDA is here to share a full report on their project, including their lessons learned.

POLICY & FISCAL IMPACTS

Policy Impact

Existing City policies support and enable robust work on placemaking throughout Bellevue. This year's work with the BDA advanced implementation and understanding of possible refinements as outlined below. Based on the lessons learned from the "Heart of Bellevue" activation and an analysis of best

practices for the COVID-19 pandemic economic recovery efforts around the country, three key takeaways have emerged:

- In times of stress, the resilience of local economies and their small businesses is closely connected to the presence and strength of local partner organizations with the capacity to reach and support them with connections to available resources, programming and advocacy. The BDA's ability to connect with and provide ground-level support to Downtown Bellevue businesses has proven essential to the City's ability assess needs and ensure the broadest reach with available resources. Similar partnerships are needed Citywide.
- 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, small businesses and residents. Even the smallest of public realm activations requires dedicated staff, time and money.
- 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 work is emphasized in the 2020 Economic Development Plan and will be especially critical for projects like the Grand Connection, which rely heavily on partnership and investment from private partners.

These key takeaways reinforce the recommendations and strategies found within various City policy documents, including the Economic Development Plan, the *Comprehensive Plan*, the *Downtown Livability Initiative*, the *Grand Connection Framework Plan*, and various planning efforts focused on the visitor experience, the creative economy, and the development of the City. For example:

The "Economic Development" element of the *Comprehensive Plan* includes the following policies:

- **ED-14:** Recognize the economic development benefits of City and private sector investments in urban amenities like arts and culture, open space and recreational facilities, and high quality urban design. Strengthen the City's assets in these areas as an explicit component of the City's economic development strategy.

The "Urban Design & The Arts" element of the *Comprehensive Plan* includes the following policies:

- **UD-4:** Create a safe, engaging and attractive pedestrian environment throughout the City using appropriate urban design features.
- **UD-58:** Provide a system of public places of various sizes and types throughout the community with a variety of experiences and accommodations.

Additionally, this program is supported by strategies identified in the *Economic Development Plan* adopted in 2020:

- **Capacity-Building and Partnerships 2:** Apply a partnership approach to strategies throughout economic development efforts to expand and improve service delivery.

Fiscal Impact

Bellevue supported the BDA's "Heart of Bellevue" recovery campaign and activation effort with funds totaling \$50,000. Project funds were a combination of CARES Act funds (\$25,000), the City's economic development grant from the Port of Seattle (\$5,000) from the Grand Connection CIP budget (\$20,000).

OPTIONS

N/A

ATTACHMENTS & AVAILABLE DOCUMENTS

A. Bellevue Downtown Association "Heart of Bellevue" Final Report

AVAILABLE IN COUNCIL LIBRARY

N/A