

CITY OF BELLEVUE
BELLEVUE PLANNING COMMISSION
STUDY SESSION MINUTES

April 28, 2021
6:30 p.m.

Bellevue City Hall
Virtual Meeting

COMMISSIONERS PRESENT: Chair Moolgavkar, Vice Chair Malakoutian,
Commissioners Bhargava, Ferris, Morisseau

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COMMISSIONERS ABSENT: Commissioners Brown, deVadoss

STAFF PRESENT: Thara Johnson, Emil King, Michael Austin, Elizabeth de
Regt, Gwen Rousseau, Department of Community
Development; Kristina Gallant, Department of
Development Services; Matt McFarland, City Attorney's
Office

COUNCIL LIAISON: Councilmember Barksdale

GUEST SPEAKERS: None

RECORDING SECRETARY: Gerry Lindsay

1. CALL TO ORDER
(6:32 p.m.)

The meeting was called to order at 6:32 p.m. by Chair Moolgavkar who presided.

Chair Moolgavkar stated that the meeting was being held remotely via zoom in order to comply with the Governor's emergency order concerning the Open Public Meetings Act, which prohibits in-person meetings.

2. ROLL CALL
(6:32 p.m.)

Upon the call of the roll, all Commissioners were present with the exception of Commissioner Morisseau, who arrived at 6:38 p.m., and Commissioners Brown and deVadoss, both of whom were excused.

3. APPROVAL OF AGENDA
(6:33 p.m.)

A motion to approve the agenda was made by Commissioner Ferris. The motion was seconded by Vice Chair Malakoutian and the motion carried unanimously.

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4. REPORTS OF CITY COUNCIL, BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS
(6:33 p.m.)

Councilmember Barksdale reported that earlier in the week the City Council held a mini retreat to finalize its priorities and vision statement.

5. STAFF REPORTS
(6:34 p.m.)

A. Planning Commission Meeting Schedule

Comprehensive Planning Manager Thara Johnson took a few minutes to review the Commission's schedule of upcoming meeting dates and agenda items.

Ms. Johnson noted that the Commission's open seat has been advertised and applications are being received.

Ms. Johnson reported that on April 26 the Council approved the residential parking standards LUCA.

6. ORAL AND WRITTEN COMMUNICATIONS
(6:38 p.m.)

Ms. Johnson noted that two written communications had been received related to the Grand Connection Land Use Code amendment, one from the Bellevue Downtown Association and the other from Larry Martin. Both included specific comments related to the proposed Land Use Code amendment language.

7. PUBLIC HEARING
(6:41 p.m.)

A. Land Use Code Amendment (LUCA) for Sequence One of the Grand Connection Guidelines and Standards, Creating a New Section 20.25A.175 in the Land Use Code (LUC)

A motion to open the public hearing was made by **Vice Chair** Malakoutian. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Ferris and the motion carried unanimously.

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Senior Planner Michael Austin noted that the proposed LUCA was well over a year in the making. He said the LUCA is one of many implementation strategies for the overall vision of the Grand Connection. He noted that there is no silver bullet to implementing the Grand Connection; there are myriad steps involved to weaving the implementation options into the wider web of existing policies. The Grand Connection initiative led to the adoption of the Sequence One [Framework Plan](#) in 2017, and the Sequence Two [Framework Plan](#) in 2018. A Comprehensive Plan [Amendment](#) (CPA) was approved which officially recognized the Grand Connection as a term. A number of individual implementation strategies are involved in the overall scheme ranging from the design guidelines and standards to activation strategies, wayfinding, future LUCAs, the Bellwether [Arts Festival](#) and the Downtown Park [Northeast Entry](#). Sequence One of the Grand Connection runs from Old Bellevue to Transit Central. Sequence Two will continue from Transit Central to Eastrail in Wilburton and will involve a number of complexities. The objectives of the proposal Sequence One LUCA is to implement the elements of the Grand Connection [Framework Plan](#) and Comprehensive Plan [Amendment](#); to update the Pedestrian Corridor and Major Public Open Space [Design Guidelines](#) and the Land Use Code to reflect the Grand Connection vision; and to remove redundant guidelines and simplify content where possible.

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Mr. Austin said when the study kicked off, steps were taken to reach out and work with stakeholders both internally at City Hall and in the community. The guidelines and standards must work for everyone from the design review staff whose job is to help guide design teams and to ensure they meet the Grand Connection vision, to the development community and the public. Testing the proposed language with projects that are active along the Grand Connection route is critical, and that work has been done both internally and externally over the last year. There have been a number of touch points with the community, including five meetings with the Bellevue Downtown Association's Land Use and Livability Committee, and with focus groups with design and developer teams focused on work along the Sequence One route.

Senior planner Kristina Gallant said the vast majority of the new content will be housed in a new section of the Land Use Code at 20.25A.175, the new section to define the Grand Connection and replace the previous pedestrian design guidelines. The new section has five subsections. The first two serve to define the Grand Connection in terms of its geographic scope, all applicable requirements, and how it relates to the rest of the Downtown code. The third subsection defines the Major Public Open Spaces, while the fourth subsection contains the Grand Connection guidelines and standards, and the fifth has specific guidance for the seven rooms along the Sequence One route, which were envisioned in the Framework Plan.

While the new section is the most significant component of the proposed LUCA in terms of defining the Grand Connection and replacing the previous Pedestrian Corridor guidelines, other conformance amendments are included in regard to the Downtown code to update references to the old pedestrian guidelines to refer to the Grand Connection; the definitions, changes to rights-of-way; and general cleanups for clarity and to correct cross references.

Mr. Austin noted that during previous study sessions, the Commission highlighted the need to support opportunities for cultural expression and cultural sensitivity. Comments were also made in regard to increased safety; supporting events and activation elements along the route; and ensuring ease-of-access to and along the Grand Connection.

Mr. Larry Martin, a land use attorney with Davis Wright Tremaine, spoke on behalf of his client Alex Smith who has property at 700 112th Avenue NE across the street from the convention center and the new light rail station. The property abuts against NE 6th Street. He asked to have a simple change to the proposed LUCA. As proposed, the amendment creates a glitch in that it will preclude Mr. Smith's property and the properties to the south from earning any bonus floor area related to the Pedestrian Corridor. To build beyond a certain base level specified in zoning, developers must earn the right to build additional square footage. One amenity on the list is the Pedestrian Corridor, which currently extends to Mr. Smith's property. Mr. Smith wants to redevelop his site, and redeveloping part of the corridor under the current regulations will earn him bonus FAR. The proposed LUCA eliminates part of the Pedestrian Corridor, including the portion that extends to Mr. Smith's property, which precludes him from earning the credit. The only other way a property owner can earn bonus FAR related to the corridor is to go out in the market place and purchase extra FAR earned by another property owner. That option would be open except for the fact that the code defines the area in which the transfer of development density can be used with a boundary that ends on the west side of 112th Avenue NE, across the street from Mr. Smith's property. The proposed code amendment takes away Mr. Smith's opportunity to build the corridor and earn bonus FAR, and precludes him from buying bonus FAR from someone else. The language should be changed to include properties on the east side of 112th Avenue NE so they can use the bonus transfer.

Mr. Alex Smith, owner of the property referenced by Mr. Martin, said the property has enough

room for, and based on the highest and best use, two towers instead of a single large tower. As envisioned, the site redevelopment would include a convention center-serving hotel and a residential tower with a 90-foot separation. Mixed use that includes residential and office as well as a hotel has been considered. A redevelopment of that sort would contribute to the civic center. Extending the Grand Connection to I-405 would allow the development to proceed on a timely basis instead of having to wait until the Sequence Two guidelines are authorized by the city. Many of the neighboring properties to the south in the OLB will enjoy the zoning upgrades and will not face an FAR challenge as they redevelopment over the next couple of years. He urged the Commission to consider the proposal outlined by Mr. Martin for the site.

Mr. Matt Jack with the Bellevue Downtown Association reinforced the comments made via letter submitted to the Commission regarding the Grand Connection [Guidelines](#) and [Standards](#). He said advancing the Grand Connection vision is a BDA priority and is a subject the Land Use and Livability Committee has tracked closely over the years. The Committee participated in the first round of stakeholder interviews in 2018, and convened more recently on six occasions to finalize input for the attention of the Commission. The feedback offered reflects the positions of property owners and employers along the Grand Connection, as well as from stakeholders who participated in the original work to develop the corridor standards and guidelines code which was adopted in 1981. The BDA supports updating the Pedestrian Corridor and Major Public Open Space [Design Guidelines](#) to reflect the vision outlined in the Council-adopted Grand Connection Sequence One. The code update aligns with the BDA's strategic plan and is consistent with past positions. BDA members are very excited to see progress made on the Grand Connection and to realize the benefits of wayfinding and placemaking. The Commission should advance the issue to the Council by summer in order to keep moving forward. The BDA supports the rooms concept and sees it as an effective approach. He noted that the previously submitted letter included suggestions relative to the code, concerns and clarity. The Commission should reinforce the need to address the patchwork inconsistencies in the Grand Connection buildout between existing properties and new development. There are going to be old properties with beautiful plazas on the Grand Connection with no incentive to redevelop into it. How the city goes about bringing everyone into the project will be very important in making sure the Grand Connection vision comes to life.

Absent additional speakers, a motion to close the public hearing was made by [Vice Chair](#) Malakoutian. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Ferris and the motion carried unanimously.

Commissioner Ferris asked staff to comment on the suggestion of the BDA to incentivize existing properties to redevelop their sections of the Grand Connection. She asked if some of the owners of those properties were included in the stakeholder surveys and if so what their input was, and she asked staff what their position was. Mr. Austin said staff took the existing properties issue seriously right from the beginning of the process. The active testing and outreach engaged with a number of different stakeholders along the route. The focus groups served as a key opportunity to engage with teams that are considering projects in the future. The project does not fall just on public rights-of-way and that means implementation of the Grand Connection will involve a lot of different steps to end up with a cohesive whole. The LUCA involves design guidelines and standards, but also involved is the amenity incentive system which developers can tap into for additional FAR. The guidelines and standards come into play when a project is triggered on a private property and at a certain threshold. The LUCA cannot trigger or force projects to be developed; a property owner must take the opportunity to start a project. The design guidelines and their implementation will be promoted to developers, but they cannot trigger private development.

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Commissioner Bhargava asked if the city had a response to the issue raised by Mr. Martin and Mr. Smith. Mr. Austin said staff received a letter outlining the concerns of the property owner. He said there are two elements to their requests. The first seeks to ensure that the language of the Grand Connection refers to the boundaries of the guidelines and standards ending at 110th Avenue NE, and their desire is to see the LUCA extend that connection to the east side of 112th Avenue NE as indicated in the current Pedestrian Corridor guidelines definition. The second element relates to the transfer of FAR bonus. The issue is a completely separate topic and is well outside the scope of the LUCA.

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Chair Moolgavkar asked what the rationale was for not including the east side of 112th Avenue NE. Mr. Austin said the scope of the LUCA is intended to support the implementation of the Sequence One design guidelines and standards. Sequence One as identified in the Framework Plan and the existing Pedestrian Corridor and Major Public Open Space Design Guidelines ends at the intersection NE 6th Street and 110th Avenue NE. In the Pedestrian Corridor it extends further about halfway down the NE 6th block to the east. During Sequence Two, there will be a number of initiatives needed to support implementation, including the Civic Center Plan, which covers the City Hall area across NE 6th Street to the Civic Center site, and the I-405 Freeway Lid Feasibility Study. The Framework Plan for Sequence Two shows an alignment crossing the freeway at NE 6th Street, but it also shows the alternative of another part of the Grand Connection alignment going through the middle of the Civic Center, across property on the other side of NE 112th Avenue NE and then onto the freeway lid. Additionally, the SEPA analysis that took place for the current LUCA was developed within the boundaries of the Sequence One extent. The Commission has the option of moving the LUCA forward as drafted, or of directing staff to amend the language of the Grand Connection to extend it to the east side of 112th Avenue NE.

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Commissioner Morisseau suggested that simply extending the border as suggested may not be as easy as it sounds. The large number of steps taken to date, including the survey and meeting with stakeholders, has led to the LUCA as proposed. To make the change would trigger the need to repeat the process. With regard to the FAR issue, she said it was her understanding that Mr. Martin and Mr. Smith felt their particular property could potentially lose the opportunity to get extra FAR. She said it was also her recollection that the area west of 112th Avenue NE is covered by the downtown livability code work, while the area east of 112th Avenue NE is not. To make a change in that regard could mean reversing the work of the downtown livability code update. Department of Planning and Community Development Assistant Director Emil King said the Smith property as well as the Legacy property to the south were both part of the downtown livability code update that was adopted in 2017. Both properties received increased height and increased FAR as a result. The current definition of the Pedestrian Corridor says it runs down NE 6th Street to the east side of 112th Avenue NE. The public hearing draft adjusted the definition of the Grand Connection to be consistent with the design guidelines that run to 110th Avenue NE. The request of Mr. Martin and Mr. Smith is to put the definition to be put back to where it was before, extending to the east side of 112th Avenue NE and indeed all the way to I-405. One option the Commission could choose would be to change the definition back to the limits in the Pedestrian Corridor, while also acknowledging that the design guidelines and standard for Sequence One do end at 110th Avenue NE.

Assistant City Attorney Matt McFarland clarified that the Downtown OLB was indeed part of the Downtown code update. If understood correctly, Mr. Martin's argument is that the Downtown OLB is also part of the Pedestrian Corridor, which would mean that if the Pedestrian Corridor ends on the east side of 112th Avenue NE, it would include the properties between

112th Avenue NE and I-405. That is a code interpretation question, which the Commission is not required to adjudicate with the recommendation to the Council. The task before the Commission is to determine whether or not the proposed LUCA meets all the design criteria.

Commissioner Morisseau said her reading of the letter from the Bellevue Downtown Association was that the organization understands the city cannot force existing properties to comply with the new guidelines and standards. The question is how to incentivize existing property owners to make the changes. Mr. Austin said that view is correct. The Pedestrian Corridor is currently an amenity incentive option and under the proposed LUCA that will not change; the Grand Connection will become an amenity incentive option, giving properties the opportunity to receive an FAR bonus. The language has been tested on projects that are currently using the amenity incentive option, including the Major Public Open Space improvements. The amenity incentive system is an important tool in the context of the Land Use Code.

Commissioner Morisseau suggested the city should take another look at the amenity incentive system and update and improve it where necessary.

There was consensus among the Commissioners not to change the language of the proposed LUCA.

A motion to recommend to the City Council adoption of the LUCA for Sequence One of the Grand Connection Guidelines and Standards creating a new Section 20.25.175 as drafted in Attachment B, consistent with the decision criteria required for adoption of amendments to the text of the Land Use Code pursuant to Part 20.30J, was made by Commissioner Morisseau. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Bhargava and the motion carried unanimously.

8. STUDY SESSION

A. Neighborhood Area Plans for Northeast Bellevue and Northwest Bellevue

Senior Planner Elizabeth de Regt informed the Commissioners that the project was launched in May 2020 after the pandemic began which made it necessary to work through the project remotely while still seeking as much community input as possible. The capacity building process proceeded into October, after which the plan development process began. The community was engaged, including in brainstorming events aimed at eliciting details about what details they wanted to see addressed. Using the feedback as a foundation, staff began the work of drafting policy language, work that is still ongoing. The work of reviewing the draft plans by the Commission will begin in May as part of the Commission's 2021 Comprehensive Plan amendment process.

Ms. de Regt explained that neighborhood area plans are important elements of the Comprehensive Plan. They provide guidance road maps that outlines the vision of the community. They highlight what is unique about each neighborhood. They are developed in collaboration with the communities to shape their neighborhood's futures. Both the Northeast and Northwest neighborhood area plans are currently being updated.

The plans will utilize a template that begins with a vision statement and a profile of the neighborhood, includes a discussion of the challenges and opportunities, all of which culminates in the goals and policies to guide future decisions. The engagement timeline was formatted alongside the template, with the early events focused on visioning, the big picture and forward thinking. The data collected went into the neighborhood profile and was used to spur

neighborhood dialog and reflection, and to trigger discussion about the challenges and opportunities facing the neighborhood ahead of drafting the goals and policies for additional review by the neighborhood. The Commission review process for the two neighborhood area plans will kick off toward the end of May and continue through June.

With regard to the capacity building strategies, Ms. de Regt said cultural outreach assistants was a new program tried out to reach the sections of the population who often do not participate in city initiatives. Four part-time staff members were hired to conduct outreach with the Chinese, Korean, Spanish and South Asian communities. The approach worked well in opening conversations and gaining feedback. Throughout the process, an Interlake high school volunteer has been working with the youth community. There have been a lot of one-on-one meetings via zoom. The cultural outreach assistants conducted 34 such meetings, and another 27 were conducted by staff. Almost half of the living units in Northwest Bellevue are multifamily units and the capacity building strategies has included reaching out to those communities through targeted apartment and condominium email blasts. Two separate mailers were sent out, one of which had a questionnaire and prepaid postage. Otter AI was used in the zoom events to facilitate live captioning for hearing impaired residents.

From the start, the process has been carried out in collaboration with the community. There has been a lot of feedback relative to affordability, mobility and access, trees, open space, sustainability, and in finding ways to connect with others in the community, especially during Covid. The process is currently focused on policies. With regard to demographics, the respondents both in terms of the online surveys and the zoom events have largely been reflective of the neighborhoods in terms of race and ethnicity, gender, age and home ownership.

Ms. de Regt said the top themes heard from the neighborhoods are sense of place, housing affordability, sense of community, mobility and access, and the environment. She said she would be before the Commission again in late May for a study session focused on the draft plans.

Commissioner Morisseau asked how the data being gathered compares to past community engagement efforts done in those neighborhoods, and if it is sufficient to give a good sense of what the population is looking for. She said she appreciated the specific outreach by the cultural outreach assistants and recommended being more intentional about reaching out to the minorities, such as the Black community, which makes up only two percent of the population. Ms. de Regt said staff have been looking at the data and the outreach numbers throughout the process. The goals set at the beginning of the process have been and are being met despite Covid, including a good cross section of the population. She said she would share more information at the next study session.

Commissioner Bhargava said it would be good to see how the mix of age, gender and ethnicities have changed in terms of public engagement during Covid, and if there are pockets where there has been a lack of engagement that could possibly be more specifically addressed with outreach.

Commissioner Ferris said she assumed that in gathering the data staff was both reporting on how things stand currently and on observed trends. Ms. de Regt said staff have looked at data showing what has changed by neighborhood over the last ten years and comparing it against the new data being collected. Commissioner Ferris commented that the city is facing a tsunami of change within the community. It is known there is a looming influx of high-paying jobs as big businesses move in, and she said she hoped staff was looking to the future and not assuming the past trendlines will continue into the future.

Vice Chair Malakoutian said as a resident of Northwest Bellevue he was on the receiving end of the outreach efforts and really appreciated the city's efforts. He said he received a number of emails advertising events and highlighting surveys. He said he was able to freely share his views and concerns.

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Chair Moolgavkar echoed the comments of Commissioner Morisseau. She said government is good at the easy outreach efforts, and said those members of the public who are engaged are always the ones who are better heard. She said she was hopeful Covid would serve as a springboard for rethinking outreach efforts, particularly to communities that might want to be involved but are not in a position or do not have the knowledge to become involved.

9. OTHER BUSINESS – None
(8:12 p.m.)

10. APPROVAL OF MINTUES
(8:12 p.m.)

A. April 14, 2021

A motion to approve the minutes as submitted was made by Commissioner Morisseau. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Ferris and the motion carried; Chair Moolgavkar and Commissioner Morisseau abstained.

11. CONTINUED ORAL COMMUNICATIONS – None
(8:18 p.m.)

12. EXECUTIVE SESSION – None
(8:18 p.m.)

13. ADJOURNMENT
(8:18 p.m.)

A motion to adjourn was made by Commissioner Morisseau. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Bhargava and the motion carried unanimously.

Chair Moolgavkar adjourned the meeting at 8:18 p.m.