

CITY OF BELLEVUE
BELLEVUE PLANNING COMMISSION
STUDY SESSION MINUTES

May 26, 2021
6:30 p.m.

Bellevue City Hall
Virtual Meeting

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

COMMISSIONERS ABSENT: Commissioners Brown, deVadoss, Morisseau

STAFF PRESENT: Thara Johnson, Emil King, Elizabeth de Regt, Gwen
Rousseau, Brooke Brod, Department of Community
Development

COUNCIL LIAISON: Councilmember Barksdale

GUEST SPEAKERS: None

RECORDING SECRETARY: Gerry Lindsay

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1. CALL TO ORDER
(6:30 p.m.)

The meeting was called to order at 6:30 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
(6:31 p.m.)

Upon the call of the roll, all Commissioners were present with the exception of Commissioners Commissioner deVadoss, Brown and Morisseau, all of whom were excused.

3. APPROVAL OF AGENDA
(6:32 p.m.)

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

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4. REPORTS OF CITY COUNCIL, BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS
(6:32 p.m.)

Councilmember Barksdale reported that the City Council adopted the Grand Connection Sequence 1 Land Use Code amendment. He thanked the Commission and staff for all the work that went into it.

5. STAFF REPORTS

(6:33 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 stated that the process of reviewing applications for new Commissioners was underway.

6. ORAL AND WRITTEN COMMUNICATIONS

A. Oral Communications

(6:34 p.m.)

Ms. Diana Thompson, 3115 103rd Avenue NE, said she had reviewed the proposed Northwest Bellevue plan and suggested that some changes were needed. First, the goals and policies of the plan should not be so generic that they can be applied to any neighborhood of Northwest Bellevue. The single family areas of Northtowne should have different goals and policies from the office complexes along 112th Avenue NE, and from the combined single family/multifamily dwelling areas of Meydenbauer. One size does not fit all. Northwest Bellevue should retain its single family residential areas, which currently take up considerably more than half of the geographic area of the subarea. Unfortunately, the draft policy S-NW-24 encourages a mix of housing typologies within both lower and higher intensity districts. Moreover, draft policy S-NW-25 recommends that the city explore introducing attached accessory dwelling units (ADUs). She voiced opposition to allowing attached ADUs in single family residential neighborhoods. If ADUs are permitted, the owner of the property should be required to live in one of the housing units on the premises. More persons in Northwest Bellevue oppose ADUs than favor them. Comments made by individuals living in the subarea range from “Don’t subdivide rezone residential properties or residential areas” to “We need you to leave us alone,” “Like the way it is,” and “People would price backyard cottages as high as they could; they would not be more affordable.” Northwest Bellevue residents did not buy their single family homes in anticipation of the zoning changing in the future in a way that would change their neighborhood. Northwest residents greatly value their trees and the plan should reduce the number of trees that can be cut down on properties without city permission.

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Ms. Michelle Nietheimer said she is a resident of Northwest Bellevue and shared with the Commission a video featuring the Northwest Bellevue subarea.

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Ms. Janet Castañeda said she had participated in every meeting since the city started the Northwest Bellevue subarea process in the fall of 2018. She voiced concern that the Commission was drawing certain conclusions that are not fully rooted in authentic data. The data shared with the Commission is not necessarily supported by the majority of the residents, and indeed not even by a majority of the engaged residents. The process was structured around very focused topics and the questions asked led to predetermined responses. The discussions were not well structured and they were limited. There was no opportunity to discuss other topics of concern to the residents. The staff asked the residents to brainstorm very focused questions in each session. The residents received a brief survey in the mail in April just two weeks prior to the input process closing. It would have been more relevant to get the residents’ input earlier in the process. Two of the questions were about backyard cottages. The wording of the questions was not neutral and clearly pushed a certain agenda. She shared some of the survey questions with

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the Commissioners to illustrate her point. Poorly worded surveys can lead to incorrect conclusions. She encouraged the Commissioners to ask questions about the data to make sure it really reflects the true values of the residents.

Mr. Emmanuel Solis noted that he had been very engaged with the Northeast Bellevue subarea study. He said he and other residents were delighted to hear that Northeast Bellevue would be one of the first neighborhoods to go through the process. He said a lot of time and energy went into the process, both from staff and from engaged residents. He said the residents who were engaged understood from the start that the boundaries of the subarea would be changing and the policies would be shifted given their involvement with the city over the years, but the topic was not really discussed during the meetings and the vast majority of the neighbors were not aware of that change. In the packet provided to the Commission, however, not all of the policies were moved to the new Northeast Bellevue area. Some policies specific to District A were not carried over from the current Crossroads subarea plan to the new Northeast Bellevue plan. Some policies were not changed at all, but others appear to have been omitted. The policies for District B, which includes the signature open space, were not carried over. That is a material change from what the neighborhood was led to believe. Clarification from staff has been requested and the neighborhood is waiting for a response. The neighborhood looks forward to continued engagement to make sure that policies of huge importance to the neighborhoods will be captured in the new plan.

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B. Written Communications
(6:52 p.m.)

Ms. Johnson noted that one written communication had been received from Mr. Dick Thompson. She said it was forwarded to the Commissioners.

7. PUBLIC HEARING – None
(6:53 p.m.)

8. STUDY SESSION
(p.m.)

A. 2021 Comprehensive Plan Amendments: Neighborhood Area Plans for Northeast Bellevue and Northwest Bellevue

Senior Planner Elizabeth de Regt noted that staff touched base with the Commission in April and provided information about the Great Neighborhoods process from its launch date to the present. She noted that a second study session was slated for June 9 to continue the conversation.

Community Engagement Lead Brooke Brod stated that the neighborhood area plans are housed in Volume 2 of the Comprehensive Plan. They provide guidance to staff, decision makers and other stakeholders about what the community hopes to see in the future for their neighborhoods. The plans help to bring the Comprehensive Plan into local focus by highlighting what is unique about each neighborhood. The plans are developed with significant involvement on the part of community members. Over the course of nearly a year there were a total of 17 events across both neighborhoods. In all, 155 residents participated in one or more meeting. New to the process was a pilot program that used cultural outreach assistants, who were members of the community hired part-time to help connect with key cultural and language groups in both the Northeast and Northwest subareas. They made seven presentations to community groups, and through one-on-one conversations with individuals and organizational leaders they made 76 presentations. In

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addition, the rest of the team held 35 small group presentations and individual discussions with community members and leaders.

Continuing, Ms. Brod said Engaging Bellevue, an online engagement website, was open throughout the process. There were 320 people in Northeast and 222 people in Northwest provide some kind of input or feedback, including through taking the survey or leaving comments. There were two direct mailings to each household in both subareas. The first was sent out in November 2020 and it invited folks to take the values online survey. The second was a questionnaire aimed at getting more specific feedback on some of the key issues around housing, trees and mobility. There were 386 households in Northeast who responded and 255 households in Northwest. Feedback on the draft policies was solicited using Engaging Bellevue. The discussions and comments from the early values survey helped determine the course of the rest of the conversation. The cultural outreach assistants were able to communicate about the program and participation opportunities to over 2500 people via social media, and more than 8000 people were informed about the neighborhood planning efforts via digital advertising and other social media efforts.

Ms. Brod noted that there are detailed charts in the engagement report for every element of engagement. She noted that in terms of gender and race the questionnaire respondents tracked actual demographics. For Northeast, more homeowners than renters participated in the survey. In general, the respondents were on the middle age and older spectrums. The youth are more difficult to draw into participating, particularly in light of the fact that the under 18 category includes toddlers. There was some good youth engagement in the Northeast through a partnership with Interlake High School and the high school intern and her team of International Baccalaureate students. There was a good representation of diversity in the values survey, largely in part due to the work of the cultural outreach assistants. The demographic trends were similar for Northwest.

Ms. de Regt noted that for both the Northeast and Northwest plans, the vision statements were crafted using the early feedback received from the communities, the values surveys and the visioning workshops. The neighborhood profile sections contain data about each community. The neighborhood context section serves as a narrative that talks through some of the challenges and opportunities facing each neighborhood, and highlights the intersections between the different themes. Finally, the goals and associated policies are written out to guide future decisions.

It was noted that goals and policies are often very broad and they do not change frequently, thus they are meant to guide long-term planning. Implementation, on the other hand, looks at the how, what, when and who when it comes to carrying the goals and policies. Implementation involves specific approaches and are often spelled out in detail, though they are prone to change much more frequently.

Ms. Brod said throughout the process some very clear themes were highlighted by the community members. They addressed both what they love about their neighborhoods and what they have concerns about. Both Northeast and Northwest highly value the parks and the parks system offered by the city. People frequently mentioned a love of and appreciation for trees, particularly mature Douglas fir trees, though in both neighborhoods a small subset highlighted as

important their view of the lake ~~or~~ the mountains. In Northeast, people especially valued the diversity of their neighborhood. Northwest had a similar appreciation for and love of parks, open space and trees. People there mentioned feeling safe in their neighborhoods. Northwest residents highlighted having access to Downtown shopping, restaurants, local businesses and amenities. For both Northeast and Northwest, housing affordability and a desire for more housing options was listed as concerns. Northeast residents voiced a strong desire to see improvements in their transportation options, particularly biking and transit. Many spoke about a desire to see better transportation connections into the neighborhoods to give them options besides driving. Northeast residents also voiced concerns about growth and density, particularly in light of the fact that the area is bordered by BelRed, Crossroads and Overlake in Redmond. Northwest residents also voiced a strong desire for housing affordability and the need for more housing options. There were particular concerns for Northwest residents around pedestrian safety, congestion and speeding.

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Senior Planner Gwen Rousseau allowed that housing was a key concern voiced by residents of both neighborhoods. In addition to those concerns, there is direction from the Comprehensive Plan to allow detached ADUs where expressly allowed by a neighborhood subarea plan. The housing strategy also directs looking at ADUs, including detached units, in self-selected neighborhoods. A number of opportunities were taken to dig more deeply into the issue. A brainstorming session was conducted to develop ideas for how to address housing affordability. A breakout room at the open house event focused on housing, and there was a specific event that focused on the opportunities to explore in terms of housing options and the concerns of the communities. One statement on the survey was included that was intended to determine the level of agreement about detached ADUs. The statement was “backyard cottages would provide an important smaller and more affordable housing option in ___” Northwest or Northeast, and the respondents were asked to indicate to what degree they agreed with the statement. There was a relatively even split in terms of agreement and disagreement for both neighborhoods. About 44 percent of Northeast agreed, ten percent were neutral, and 46 percent disagreed. In Northwest, 45 percent agreed, 12 percent were neutral, and 44 percent expressed disagreement. What was clear was there is a need to continue the conversation in order to address the important issue citywide.

The two neighborhoods have members on both sides of the housing discussion. Some have expressed a desire for a variety of housing options so that a variety of people can live in their neighborhoods, while others have expressed a desire not to allow detached ADUs because they do not feel they fit within their neighborhoods and because they could result in undesirable environmental impacts such as loss of tree canopy and increased impervious surface area.

Ms. Rousseau said there were broad citywide themes that arose in both neighborhoods. She reiterated that both neighborhoods voiced a strong desire to protect trees, open space and natural assets. There was also a high level of importance given to improving walkability in both neighborhoods and to generally increase accessibility to retail amenities. There were also concerns expressed about growth and what it means in terms of single family lots into larger homes, the resulting housing shortage and increased prices, and impacts on existing infrastructure.

The Northeast neighborhood highlighted a desire to increase opportunities to build community connections through the expansion of gathering spaces and community events. There was also a strong desire to maintain the peaceful character of Northeast. The need to respond to increasing growth in the abutting areas was also highlighted in terms of having a separation or buffer, addressing traffic impacts and safety concerns, and general walkability. Concerns were also voiced about the potential for increases in single family redevelopment and what that might mean in terms of housing scale within the neighborhood, altering the character.

Ms. de Regt said Northwest Bellevue has a lot of different types of spaces, neighborhoods from a lot of different time periods, a lot of different scales, and a lot of different uses. The neighborhood skirts the Downtown in that it lies both to the west and north of the Downtown. The residents voiced a desire to maintain the variety of areas within the overall subarea, and to make sure the Downtown does not sprawl out into the neighborhood. Northwest Bellevue, likely because of its proximity to the Downtown, saw the highest percentage of redevelopment of single family properties over the last ten years. That has triggered concerns about the impact on neighborhood character, the loss of tree canopy, housing affordability, and the long-term impacts of being located near the Downtown. Walkability was prioritized by Northwest even more than in Northeast.

Ms. de Regt said the policy sections are separated into the five categories that were identified through the process: sense of place, sense of community, housing affordability, mobility and access, and environment.

Ms. Rousseau stated that in addition to updating the policies and goals of the two subarea plans, there will be updates made to the subarea boundaries. The boundary changes are due to the new neighborhood area boundaries that were adopted into the Comprehensive Plan in 2016. The intent is to draw the boundary lines to better reflect how neighborhoods organize themselves. The revisions, however, trigger the need to keep an eye on policies from the former plans and pulling them into the new areas. Two areas of the Northeast subarea will be moving into the Lake Hills and West Lake Sammamish neighborhoods. No border shifts are called for relative to what is currently known as North Bellevue, though the name has been changed to Northwest Bellevue.

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There are several policies from the former Crossroads plan, which was last updated in the 1980s, that will be moving into the Northeast Bellevue plan. The only ones that will be moved, however, are those that remain relevant, including the ban on multifamily development in District A.

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Ms. de Regt said time would be taken at the June 9 Commission meeting to walk through the policies. She said great ideas about implementation were shared by both neighborhoods and steps have been taken to make sure they are not lost. They will appear as an attachment at the next study session.

Commissioner Ferris commended the staff for the amount of work done and for the data provided. She also thanked the members of the public who provided thoughtful testimony. She

noted from the engagement reports that Northeast included an effort to engage students at Interlake High School and efforts to reach a diverse audience, but said she did not see the same for Northwest in terms of reaching out to a younger audience. Ms. Brod said the team did reach out to schools in the study areas or which had students from the study area neighborhoods, including Interlake High School, Bennett Elementary, Sherwood Elementary, Ardmore, Medina, Clyde Hill, Bellevue High School, Chinook Middle School and Highland Middle School. Given that the work had to be done remotely, there was reliance on the principals and staff. While some elementary schools were interested, for most it was a bit overwhelming to be involved. Bellevue High School, Chinook Middle School and Highland Middle School simply did not respond despite repeated outreach. With regard to reaching out to diverse communities in both areas, census and school district data was used to determine which language and community groups were most prevalent. Four cultural outreach assistants were hired to work with the Latino, Korean, Chinese and South Asian communities. Commissioner Ferris said she would like to see the city continue to engage the younger generations.

Commissioner Bhargava thanked the staff for their presentation. With regard to Northeast, he noted that more housing options was raised as a desire, but on the flip side residents there raised concerns about the impacts of growth and density. He asked what came out in the outreach sessions that brought those two issues together from the standpoint of the community. Ms. Rousseau said the challenge is that there is a wide range of ideas and concerns in terms of the housing issues. Pretty much all of the residents acknowledged that there are housing affordability issues that are in need of solutions. The housing growth issue is comprised of two elements: the growth in the areas surrounding the neighborhood, and their desire to preserve what they see as the character of their neighborhood. There are no perfect answers and more exploration is needed. The draft policy language regarding ADUs does not call for simply allowing them because no such strong desire was expressed by the community as a whole.

Commissioner Bhargava allowed that there is a desire for increased housing options, while at the same time there are concerns about changing the pure single family character of the neighborhoods. Those two voices are likely coming from different parts of the community and will take an engaged program to bring them to some understanding. He asked what the planning point of view is in terms of a policy solution that will allow for multiple choices. Ms. Rousseau said staff certainly can provide recommendations, which currently is to continue exploring the options and to continue having in-depth discussions. Ms. de Regt allowed that there are a lot of different viewpoints in the neighborhood and noted that staff was trying to represent everything that was heard. There is general agreement that housing affordability is a concern, but there is disagreement about how to address it. There are a lot of people who are concerned about the growth pressures near both neighborhoods, but there is variation in just what the pressures are. There are those who do not want to see a lot of density added to their neighborhood and who believe the solution is to offer other options that are at a smaller scale, such as detached ADUs.

Chair Moolgavkar commented that it is the job of the Commission to frame the issues and provide solutions for the community based on data and feedback. She said she was not yet clear as to what the solutions are.

Vice Chair Malakoutian reiterated that as a resident of the Northwest subarea, he was one person who was interviewed as part of the study process. He stated that the city cannot address affordable housing without sacrificing something. The issue will not magically be resolved by focusing on retaining the character of neighborhoods and not allowing more traffic. Something will have to be sacrificed for the greater good. He asked what lessons have been learned about reaching out to the diverse communities for input on how to improve the city. Ms. Brod said the main thing that can be done going forward is to make sure the relationships that have been established through the process are not left to wither. The work of the cultural outreach assistants was in part to establish relationships with diverse communities. It will be important to stay in touch with those groups and to avoid a one and done approach. Additionally, the city should continue to invest in building relationships through the schools. Many communities actually organize around the schools.

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Councilmember Barksdale thanked the staff for their great work. He noted from the assets charts that cultural diversity was not high on either list. With regard to community concerns, cultural diversity is not listed as a big concern. Ms. Brod pointed out that in the values survey, diversity came out on top in Northeast. The assets and concerns charts represented a reading of every single open-ended comment received via an event, an online engagement survey and the questionnaires. Not everyone who participated left an open-ended comment, which provides additional context. While the charts provide some clarity, they are not the last word on how the communities think about diversity. When people talk about housing affordability, they often are talking about diversity and socioeconomic diversity at the same time. Others will see something like community connection and they will think they want more connections with neighbors of different cultural backgrounds. There is a lot of connection between the values and the concerns.

Ms. de Regt pointed out that assets are meant to be things that already exist in the neighborhood while the values are things that might already exist but might need enhancing. People talking about the importance of diversity occurs more in the values statement as they describe where they want things to be in the future, whereas the assets and concerns are generally more an analysis of current conditions.

Commissioner Ferris said she was struck by the rich conversation about what are long-term impacts. She said from her perspective, things were being rushed too much. One person commented that the survey came late in the process and that they were not allowed the time to provide additional feedback. She asked if the process could be put on pause to allow for gathering more input around the specific issues.

Chair Moolgavkar agreed and said it felt to her as though the Commission were being pushed really hard toward making big decisions, and it feels like there just is not enough time to gather all the pertinent details for each issue. She said the Commission could ask for an additional study session, but at some point will have to take action given the direction from the Council. Ms. Johnson said staff would need to think about that. She stressed that the issue is part of the year's work program for Comprehensive Plan amendments. She also pointed out that the code was recently changed relative to how it functions in regard to Comprehensive Plan amendments to allow the Commission additional review time. The current schedule has the Commission on

break during the month of August, ~~having completed~~ the public hearing in July. Experience has shown that the summer months are not the best time to be doing additional engagement with the public given that many are away for vacations while the schools are closed.

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Chair Moolgavkar commented that even though the Commission has been given more time for review, the topics have been far more complicated and difficult. It may be that the Council has simply asked the Commission to accomplish too much in the given timeframe. Things like subarea plans should not be rushed. Doing more outreach should take precedence over the schedule.

Department of Planning and Community Development Assistant Director Emil King said he appreciated the full conversation on the part of the Commissioners. He stressed that the focus of the meeting was on introducing the details and said staff would take to heart the comments about the complexity of doing neighborhood plans and the topics that are of importance both in the near term and for the long term. The resulting documents will be very important and having a robust discussion with the public is absolutely necessary along with having the right level of staff analysis before formulating recommendations for the Council.

Chair Moolgavkar asked staff to come to the next meeting with a potential plan for extending the process.

Vice Chair Malakoutian said he appreciated all the comments but stressed the need to be cautious about reaching out to more people and taking more time to discuss the issues. The Commission must do its due diligence, but at some point it will be necessary for the Commission to take action.

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Commissioner Bhargava agreed. He said if the staff are asked to go back and do more public outreach, and to rethink the policy framework to address the concerns, they should be as specific as possible in terms of guidance and concerns. There are gaps to be addressed before moving forward, but there is also clear direction for the Commission to take action by forwarding a recommendation to the Council.

9. OTHER BUSINESS – None

10. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

A. May 12, 2021

A motion to approve the minutes as submitted was made by Vice Chair Malakoutian. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Bhargava and the motion carried unanimously.

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11. CONTINUED ORAL COMMUNICATIONS – None

12. EXECUTIVE SESSION – None

13. ADJOURNMENT

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

Chair Moolgavkar adjourned the meeting at 7:59 p.m.