

CITY OF BELLEVUE
BELLEVUE PLANNING COMMISSION
STUDY SESSION MINUTES

March 24, 2021
6:30 p.m.

Bellevue City Hall
City Council Conference Room 1E-113

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

COMMISSIONERS ABSENT: Commissioner deVadoss

STAFF PRESENT: Thara Johnson, Emil King, Michael Austin, Department of
Community Development; Nick Whipple, Department of
Development Services

COUNCIL LIAISON: Councilmember Barksdale

GUEST SPEAKERS: None

RECORDING SECRETARY: Gerry Lindsay

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 Commissioner deVadoss, who was excused.

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

A motion to approve the agenda was made by Commissioner Morisseau. The motion was seconded by Commissioner Brown and the motion carried unanimously.

4. REPORTS OF CITY COUNCIL, BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS – None
(6:32 p.m.)

5. STAFF REPORTS
(6:32 p.m.)

A. Planning Commission Meeting Schedule

Comprehensive Planning Manager Thara Johnson briefly reviewed the Commission's calendar of upcoming meeting dates and agenda items.

Ms. Johnson announced that Commissioner deVadoss had provided official notice of his intent to resign from the Commission effective in June.

Commissioner Morisseau said she was saddened to hear about the resignation of Commissioner deVadoss. She said she has always appreciated the different perspectives he brings to the table and said she hoped that his replacement will also bring different perspectives to the table.

6. ORAL AND WRITTEN COMMUNICATIONS – None
(6:38 p.m.)

7. PUBLIC HEARING – None
(6:40 p.m.)

8. STUDY SESSION
(6:40 p.m.)

A. Proposed Land Use Code Amendment (LUCA) for Sequence One of the Grand Connection Guidelines and Standards

Senior Planner Michael Austin sought from the Commission direction to prepare for the public hearing on the proposed Land Use Code amendment, which is scheduled for April 28. He reminded the Commissioners that the Grand Connection initiative was adopted in 2015 and providing overarching guidance. The Grand Connection is the newest incarnation of what was initially the pedestrian corridor that was established in the Downtown in the 1980s. There have been a number of developments since adoption of the Grand Connection initiative in the form of implementation strategies. The design guidelines and standards LUCA is one of those implementation elements. Sequence One runs from Main Street and 100th Avenue NE in Old Bellevue and winds its way through Downtown Park to Bellevue Way, then heads east on NE 6th Street along the length of the old pedestrian corridor before terminating at Transit Central. Everything to the west of Old Bellevue is Meydenbauer Bay Park, Phase I, which is complete, and Phase II, the elements of which will all contribute to the Grand Connection experience. To the east is the Civic Center that runs the block of NE 112th to NE 110th Avenue NE, which is the area where City Hall and the Meydenbauer Center are located. That segment will need its own long-range planning study to identify the opportunities as light rail is introduced. The I-405 lid concept will also require its own study. From there the Grand Connection moves into the Wilburton neighborhood.

Senior Planner Nick Whipple said the proposed LUCA has three main objectives: 1) to implement the elements of the 2017 Grand Connection Framework Plan and the 2018 Comprehensive Plan amendment; 2) to update the Pedestrian Corridor and Major Public Open Space design guidelines to reflect the Grand Connection vision; and 3) to remove redundant guidelines and simplify the content where possible. There are many requirements, standards, criteria and guidelines included in the Downtown code Chapter 20.25A and staff have worked to make sure information is not repeated and that conflicts are not created. The update process outlines the three phases of articulation, formulation and adoption. The articulation phase involved a staff audit of existing materials on the pedestrian corridor, and the framework plan created by the consultant firm. That information, along with a review of the larger Downtown plan, went into structuring the outline for the Sequence One Grand Connection LUCA. In the

formulation phase different precedent studies were reviewed, some active projects along the Grand Connection route were tested in terms of the guidelines being drafted, and there were a number of different touch points with stakeholders. After the draft LUCA was completed and prior to the Commission's last study session, there were focus groups conducted with different developer teams, including architects and people familiar with Downtown development; their feedback was outlined in the previous study session with the Commission.

Mr. Whipple said once direction is given from the Commission to move ahead with a public hearing on April 28, the LUCA and the Commission's recommendation will be taken before the City Council for a study session and subsequent adoption.

Mr. Austin noted that the staff team has been actively engaged in testing with three active projects. One project is already under construction and the testing done on it has been very helpful.

Mr. Whipple said the new Land Use Code section being created will replace the Pedestrian Corridor and Major Public Open Space guidelines which were established in 1981. Chapter 20.25A will be amended to create a new section that is intended to streamline the provisions that relate to the Grand Connection. It is also meant to be more clear and user friendly for reviewers, project teams and the general public. There will be five subsections, each of which will address the development of the Grand Connection and the Major Public Open Spaces.

Continuing, Mr. Whipple pointed out that Attachment C to the staff report included both the draft LUCA and conformance amendments to the land use chapter, 20.25A, of the Land Use Code. He said a number of conformance amendments are needed to effectively integrate the proposed new section, 20.25A.175, and to assure consistency with the broader Downtown code. He stressed that the conformance amendments do not separately make any substantive changes to the Land Use Code. They include new definitions to include such things as Grand Connection rooms, and they modify some existing definitions. In the Land Use Code there are building/sidewalk relationship designations, and the conformance amendments include a redesignation of 102th Avenue NE between Main Street and NE 1st Street from a B right-of-way to an A right-of-way, which has the highest orientation toward pedestrians. The designation change will result in a slight increase in the amount of points of interest, which include artistic elements, interesting building modulations and other design features. There will also be an expectation for more active uses resulting from the designation change. The changes are necessary to support the Grand Connection design guidelines and standards and to account for the route that extends through Old Bellevue. The draft includes a number of edits to clarify content and to update some cross references.

At the Commission's March 10 study session there was good discussion about the draft LUCA and some important comments and questions raised. A number of Commissioners discussed the topic of accessibility and expressed a desire to emphasize accessibility beyond the minimum requirements of the Americans With Disabilities Act. The team meet subsequently with representatives of the transportation department and the diversity team to discuss the issue, to emphasize the concept of the Grand Connection being an inclusive route and amenity for all to enjoy. The team also took another look at the 2018 Comprehensive Plan amendment and the policies and found policy support for an accessible and intuitive multimodal connection designed for all users. Based on the policy language, the discussion with the Commission and with other city staffers, it was concluded that universal design should be added to the intent statement along with universal access to bolster the focus beyond just access-related approaches to accessibility. There are four predominant goals for the Grand Connection that each proposal must address in

order to receive design review approval. The four goals are included in the draft LUCA and the team recommends amending one of the four to incorporate universal design and to use the opportunity to clarify what that means in the context of the Grand Connection. The specific language proposed for policy S-DT-45.D.b is “Facilitate both universal access and design by integrating intuitive features within each Room to promote equitable use and safe and accessible opportunities for people to move, explore, gather and relax.”

The Commission also raised the issue of ensuring access to the Grand Connection from elsewhere in the city. The comment was in acknowledgement that the Grand Connection is a special placemaking feature through Downtown Bellevue and that people living in all parts of the city should have access to it. Mr. Whipple said the staff agree with that sentiment. He noted that people access the Downtown through via a variety of ways, and there are certain focal points that draw people to the Grand Connection and the pedestrian corridor, including Meydenbauer Bay Park, Downtown Park and Inspiration Playground in Downtown Park. People have options for accessing those focal points, including by bus and in the future by light rail, as well as on foot. The parks department in its efforts to update the Parks and Open Space System Plan is also evaluating access and equity, but for the proposed LUCA specifically, the staff believe the additional references to universal access and design in the intent statement will help to elevate the notion of access for all.

Mr. Austin noted the Commission had highlighted the need to emphasize cultural sensitivity where possible. He said staff recognizes the importance of cultural sensitivity, especially in light of the city’s racial diversity. Policy UD-20.1 of the Urban Design element, adopted in 2018, calls for supporting and encouraging the development of the Grand Connection as a cultural corridor by designing and creating spaces for performance, installation and temporary based art and cultural installations. The proposed LUCA language echoes that policy direction through the words “establish a vibrant cultural corridor that offers enjoyable and memorable experiences.” The Grand Connection design is catered to create multiple scales of different spaces to facilitate artistic expression. With each room there is language to identify or encourage the use of artistic elements. It can get tricky in deciding what specific cultural elements should be highlighted given that there is no specific policy language that narrows down the focus to the type of art or cultural elements that specifically should be highlighted, but the language of the proposed LUCA does cater to that response.

Mr. Austin said the Commission had also previously raised comments in support of safe and active routes, particularly at street intersections. He said the city’s exceptional intersections program specifically highlights a number of intersections in the Downtown along the Grand Connection route. Comprehensive Plan policy also offers guidance on encouraging the development of the Grand Connection vision to create a unique, defining and signature experience for people walking, riding a bicycle, or using other compatible mobility options, recognizing that the pedestrian experience and pedestrian safety take precedence over other modes. There are a number of intersection improvement that either are in motion or are planned.

With regard to the issue of cultural sensitivity, Commissioner Bhargava allowed that the language makes reference to artistic elements and emphasizing the need for diversity. He said, however, that it does not directly address the question of cultural sensitivity in a way the guidelines could given how diverse Bellevue has become. He proposed being more specific in calling for artistic elements that celebrate cultural diversity, and being clear about the fact that signs and symbols have different connotations depending on the culture. Mr. Austin said staff recognizes the importance of the topic, particularly in light of current world events. The design guidelines and standards live within the Land Use Code, and that changes the way they are

written. One thing considered at one point was use of the word celebrate in terms of cultural diversity, but that raises questions about whose history or who specifically in the community should be celebrated. He said it was helpful to know different symbols have different connotations and added that some do not stand the test of time and can devolve into being inappropriate. That is particularly important in terms of things like wayfinding and signage.

Commissioner Brown thanked staff for an excellent presentation and said she cannot help comparing the Grand Connection to something like the Burke Gillman Trail in Seattle. She said the Grand Connection is far more ambitious because it cuts through the heart of the Downtown using incredibly busy intersections. She allowed that some intersections have special designations but asked if any consideration had been given to creating pedestrian overpasses.

Mr. Austin said the focus of the planning for the Grand Connection has been on making sure everything takes place on the ground. The concepts of universal access and universal design are predicated on creating fluid and accessible situations along the entire route. Keeping things on the ground is typically a best practice. Department of Planning and Community Development Assistant Director Emil King added that over the years consideration has been given to where it might make sense to separate pedestrians from the ground level. There is some allowance in the Downtown for skybridges to span arterials, though only in a limited number of places. With the Grand Connection the thinking has been to keep activities at the ground level to help activate the land uses. In future years as the staff and the Commission get into discussing Wilburton and the Civic Center, attention will be given to some of the major arterials, and the notion of having an Eastrail bridge over NE 8th Street.

Commissioner Ferris encourage staff to take to heart the comments made by Commissioner Bhargava given his unique perspective. She noted that she had previously raised the issue of accessibility from the sense of the rest of the community. She said for a family living in northeast Bellevue, it is possible they would not even know the Grand Connection exists. She encouraged staff to think broadly about how to invite in everyone living in the city to enjoy the amenities of the Grand Connection. Much will come down to signage, some of which could be located well outside of the Grand Connection route. The Grand Connection will truly be a citywide gem.

Chair Moolgavkar concurred with the comments of Commissioner Bhargava about cultural sensitivity. She asked, though, if staff had given any thought to some of the things the city has historically not been very proud of, such as Japanese and Native American history, and acknowledging them along the corridor. Mr. Austin said Bellevue does not take those instances of history lightly. The staff do their best to craft responses in a way that can tie things back to specific policy direction, but the topic is both important and tricky to weave into the Land Use Code. He said staff have indeed discussed the history of Japanese Americans in Bellevue in relation to the project and the extent to which it can be articulated in the Land Use Code. Without specific policy direction, however, that focuses attention on a specific history or certain elements of history, and the types of cultural and racial diversity should be highlighted, it is difficult to fold into the Grand Connection part of the Land Use Code without opening the gates to multiple reinterpretations.

Mr. King agreed that the topic is important to the staff and is talked about often in relation to all projects. The proposed design guidelines present a balanced approach. They allow for art activities and other expressions to occur in the Grand Connection.

Chair Moolgavkar asked if there is a way for the Commission to ask the Council to provide more general guidance around the topic. Mr. King said the Grand Connection is going to be one of the

must-see destinations for residents and visitors alike. As such the history and values of Bellevue residents should be evoked by the project. The Commission could note that for the Council and suggest that the Council should direct the staff and other boards and commissions to address the topic.

Commissioner Bhargava said the fear always is that the project will end up with artistic elements that did not go through design review and which over time are deemed to be culturally insensitive. Creating public gathering spaces and encouraging their use is a laudable effort on the part of the city. He asked, however, in light of recent events how the issue of safety is taken into account from the perspective of urban design elements that could help people shelter in place. Mr. Austin said the question is a very interesting one and addresses something communities around the world are facing. Often the way urban design and architecture works is to reflect what is taking place in the world. In some areas the result has been designs that give people a sense of shelter. Red Square at the University of Washington is a good example. The open space along the Grand Connection is focused as much as possible on evoking a sense of openness and porosity, which is the approach the city has always strived for. The guidelines are drafted to achieve that goal and contribute to the experience of a safe place. Places that are bustling and busy benefit from having eyes on the street and offer benefits in terms of crime prevention through environmental design.

Commissioner Bhargava said the idea of having eyes on the street is pertinent. Lighting and other design elements are key to considering urban design safety and have been for many years. What is emerging, however, is almost a requirement to rethink and challenge some of those notions to consider additional safety elements, such as avoiding pedestrian choke points and creating ingress and egress that allows for emergency access. Mr. Austin said staff conducted a resilience prioritization analysis about a year ago that involved the Grand Connection. A resilience analysis looks at shocks and stressors. Shocks are acute events that may happen without warning. Stressors are ongoing elements and include such things as seasonal wildfires and high levels of congestion that create stress on infrastructure systems. The prioritization exercise was aimed at identifying the top shocks and stressors along the Grand Connection. One thing identified was the importance of universal wayfinding embedded along the route. Another stressor element identified was the fact that Bellevue's Downtown has a large number of active construction sites; that serves as a deterrent for many but it can also create confusion as the skyline changes and becomes unrecognizable.

Commissioner Brown asked if there has been any talk of holding an annual trail-to-bay run/walk or some other kind of community event for walking the Grand Connection together. She said that would be a good way to introduce people to the Grand Connection and show it off. Mr. Austin said that would be a great way to promote the Grand Connection. He said he would relay the comment to the staff involved with activating programs along the route, and to the Bellevue Downtown Association and the Chamber of Commerce.

Councilmember Barksdale praised the Commission for having another great discussion. He took a moment to amplify the issues of safety and shelter in place elements raised by Commissioner Bhargava and suggested it should be given more consideration. No city ever expects to be the site of a mass shooting, but it is an unfortunate reality that must be faced. Evacuation is not always an option in such instances. Mr. Austin said he would relay the comments to the rest of the team. He said they may want to discuss other citywide strategies beyond the Grand Connection.

There was consensus to set the public hearing date for April 28.

9. OTHER BUSINESS
(7:36 p.m.)

10. APPROVAL OF MINUTES

A. March 10, 2021
(7:36 p.m.)

Commissioner Morisseau called attention to the last paragraph on page 7. She asked to have the last sentence of the paragraph revised to read to indicate that the proposed amendment does meet some of the decision criteria.

Chair Moolgavkar directed staff to work with Commissioner Morisseau to appropriately reflect her comment in the minutes, and to set the minutes for approval at the next meeting.

11. CONTINUED ORAL COMMUNICATIONS – None
(7:39 p.m.)

12. EXECUTIVE SESSION – None
(7:39 p.m.)

13. ADJOURNMENT
(7:39 p.m.)

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

Chair Moolgavkar adjourned the meeting at 7:39 p.m.



4/16/2021

Thara Johnson
Staff to the Planning Commission

Date



4/16/2021

Mohammad Malakoutian
Vice Chair of the Planning Commission

Date