

CITY OF BELLEVUE
CITY COUNCIL

Summary Minutes of Study Session

March 3, 2014
6:00 p.m.

Council Conference Room
Bellevue, Washington

PRESENT: Mayor Balducci, Deputy Mayor Wallace, and Councilmembers Chelminiak, Lee, Robertson, Robinson, and Stokes

ABSENT: None.

1. Executive Session

Deputy Mayor Wallace opened the meeting at 6:01 p.m., and declared recess to Executive Session for approximately 30 minutes to discuss one item of property acquisition.

The meeting resumed at 6:27 p.m., with Mayor Balducci presiding.

2. Study Session

(a) Update on Downtown Livability Initiative

Acting City Manager Brad Miyake recalled that the Downtown Livability Initiative was launched in 2013 to review and update the Land Use Code for Downtown Bellevue.

Chris Salomone, Director of Planning and Community Development, said the 15-member Downtown Livability Initiative Citizens Advisory Committee (CAC) has been meeting since May 2013.

Dan Stroh, Planning Director, presented an update on the work related to the Downtown Livability Initiative. This effort is primarily a targeted review of regulations that guide Downtown development and land use activity.

Mr. Stroh said the Downtown has developed into nine neighborhood areas. He noted that the 12 principles for this work were established by the Council and are provided in the meeting packet beginning on page SS 2-9.

Emil King, Strategic Planning Manager, described the boundaries of the Downtown and the changes in population and employment since 1980. He presented a conceptual map of opportunities for future development in the Downtown.

Mr. King reminded the Council of the 15 members on the CAC. [A list is provided on page SS 2-7 of the meeting packet.] Additional stakeholders include residents and business representatives who have attended meetings and provided input. The CAC meets monthly and public comment is accepted at all meetings. Mr. King noted that David Sutherland resigned from the CAC in November due to a workload increase in his job.

Mr. King said the CAC reached a milestone in January with the identification of a range of strategies and alternatives to be evaluated against the Council Principles and sets of evaluation criteria. Topical areas include building height and form, the major pedestrian corridor, public open spaces, amenity incentive system, design guidelines, downtown parking, and other Code amendments (e.g., food trucks).

Mr. King described public involvement activities and outreach to Downtown residents and businesses.

Mr. King said the draft Land Use Code Audits report was produced last June. It identified what is working well and helped to diagnose issues and opportunities on which to focus.

Responding to Councilmember Robinson, Mr. King said the area along the south side of Main Street (north end of Surrey Downs) is technically outside of the Downtown boundary and is not being addressed in this work.

Councilmember Robertson questioned whether there are plans to replace the CAC member who resigned. She said one or two Board/Commission members on the CAC have terms ending soon, and she asked whether they will continue on the CAC.

Mr. King said staff does not have a recommendation to fill the Downtown Employer position on the CAC. He said there would be quite a learning curve for a new member at this point in the process.

Councilmember Lee brought up the issue of mobility and Downtown transportation planning.

Mr. King said he and Patti Wilma are part of the Downtown Transportation Plan team. That transportation planning is being incorporated into the Downtown Livability Initiative study.

Mr. Lee suggested making it more clear in the Downtown Livability information that the work is being coordinated with transportation planning. Mr. King concurred.

Mr. King described a map of the Downtown identifying development based on building height and form (including density).

Mr. King said the CAC has had quite a bit of discussion on building height and form. One key issue is whether heights and their urban form should be modified to better achieve the vision for the Downtown. He said there is general support on the CAC for the wedding cake pattern in the Downtown built environment.

Mr. King said that, currently, the tallest buildings in the Downtown are 450 feet. There is some interest on the CAC to discuss potentially allowing heights up to 600 feet.

Responding to Mayor Balducci, Mr. King said staff is modeling the outcome of taller heights as well as taller heights plus different floor-area ratios, up to the current FAR maximum of 9 in the Downtown core. Staff is not modeling increases in FAR only, which would result in bulkier buildings.

Councilmember Robertson commented on the importance of residents being able to see what those taller heights might actually look like.

Mr. King described how the analysis will be conducted to create a 3D model of the existing built environment, projects underway, and potential development on undeveloped lots. A number of scenarios will be studied and presented to the Council.

Councilmember Robinson questioned the potential for development to create micro-climates within the Downtown. Mr. King said there are computer programs that can take wind and other factors into consideration. He will add that to the list of the evaluation criteria.

Responding to Councilmember Stokes, Mr. King referenced page 2-11 of the meeting packet for information on the topics identified by the CAC and the evaluation criteria for each topic/issue. The building height and form topic is summarized on page 2-13.

Ms. Balducci encouraged Councilmembers to provide early feedback if there are aspects that they absolutely do or do not want to consider or to be studied further.

Continuing, Mr. King said residential buildings are currently allowed to 200 feet in the MU District. Staff and the CAC will be studying potential heights up to 300 feet. For the A area within the first 150 feet along the edges of the Downtown, staff and the CAC will look into expanding residential building heights from 55 feet to 70 feet. For the B area, staff and the CAC will study the potential for increasing residential building heights from 90 feet to 125 feet.

Responding to Councilmember Chelminiak, Mr. King said staff will analyze increased building heights alone as well as increased heights and FARs together.

Mayor Balducci questioned an area along I-405.

Responding to Deputy Mayor Wallace, staff said the Skyline Tower across the street from City Hall is approximately 250 feet tall. City Center Two is approximately 320 feet high.

Councilmember Chelminiak said the increased heights and densities raise the issue of mobility. Many of the streets are not built to handle large traffic volumes. He expressed concern that increased heights and FARs will not be appropriate in certain areas.

Deputy Mayor Wallace said that, if the City is going to take a look at height and form increases, it should be made clear that this is just a look and not a final decision. He observed that these are fairly significant changes to consider.

Mr. Wallace questioned how the transportation study intersects with an analysis of potentially increasing the FAR.

Mr. King said the transportation study used a 2030 market forecast for its modeling. Staff anticipates that specific FAR increases might not change the 2030 market forecast but it might change the distribution of development throughout the Downtown.

Mr. Wallace said there is a bit of an incongruity in hearing about the potential growth in trips combined with no funding for I-405, as well as a potential increase in FAR.

Mr. King said the CAC provided clear direction to study a broad range of options. However, the CAC will be checking in monthly with staff and does not intend to pursue alternatives that do not make sense or seem feasible or desirable as the process moves forward.

Referring back to Mayor Balducci's question, Mr. King said the OLB district between I-405 and 112th Avenue has somewhat of a suburban zoning pattern. It is limited to 3 FAR for residential and non-residential development and dictates a height limit of 75 feet for an office building and 90 feet for a residential or hotel structure. It has a 20-foot setback from 112th Avenue, which is different from many Downtown streets. Mr. King said the CAC has provided direction to study the implications of extending the zoning on the Bravern, Convention Center, and City Hall parcels to I-405. The effect would be examining how FARs up to 6 and 350-foot building heights would look.

Mayor Balducci concurred with Deputy Mayor Wallace that the discussion sounds like fairly significant changes. She realizes that these are just ideas to study, but she is concerned about development that would be too intense and change the character of what everyone likes about Downtown Bellevue.

Councilmember Stokes said he is comfortable with looking at the potential scenarios. He noted that the development would occur over many years, and he would like to consider all alternatives.

Councilmember Robertson concurred. She feels it is time for a thorough review of the Downtown plan and she would like to see all of the analysis suggested by the CAC. She said it might make sense to allow taller buildings along I-405 because the topography slopes down along the freeway. There will be more pedestrian activity with light rail in that area as well. Ms. Robertson also wants to study the economics of different scenarios as incentives are considered

later in the process. Councilmember Robertson acknowledged the importance of ensuring there is time to evaluate preferred alternatives with regard to transportation impacts as well. She said the area of the Downtown represents less than three percent of all land within the city limits.

Councilmember Lee concurred with Councilmember Robertson that the Downtown Plan has not been reviewed in many years and it would be appropriate to study a wide range of alternatives. The City needs to make sure that mobility will be viable with any alternative. He noted that the CAC was established to identify ideas for study and Council consideration.

Councilmember Chelminiak said the focus should continue to be on multiple areas including the Bel-Red corridor, Wilburton, and Eastgate. He cautioned that the Downtown could become too large, to its own detriment. He is concerned about 300-foot heights and sees intensities beyond what he believes the Council should be considering. Mr. Chelminiak stated his understanding that the Downtown Livability Initiative was intended to target how development could be handled differently in the Downtown with a principle to not increase intensity. He said it makes sense to study alternatives for the OLB district along I-405.

Continuing, Mr. King described the pedestrian corridor between Bellevue Way and City Hall along the NE 6th Street alignment. The CAC has discussed how the corridor has not reached its full potential. There are differences of opinion within the CAC about the appropriate role for the City - whether to be more active in planning and/or making changes or to allow private development to occur as it will.

Mr. King talked about the key issue of making the Pedestrian Corridor more memorable and vibrant. This includes studying weather protection, more green elements, connecting to light rail, bicycle usage, and whether to allow off-site contributions from developers. Other potential measures include partnerships to add events and activities, renaming/re-branding the corridor, and improving wayfinding, lighting, and other aesthetic elements.

Deputy Mayor Wallace asked whether PACCAR has been involved in discussions, especially since that building is a key property along the Pedestrian Corridor. Mr. King said a PACCAR representative was initially engaged in discussions about the corridor. However, that person retired and there has not been PACCAR involvement since that time. Mr. Wallace suggested engaging in renewed discussions with PACCAR.

Patti Wilma, Project Development Manager, said the CAC and residents are interested in how public open spaces can make the Downtown more memorable and vibrant. This evaluation will include open space expression, I-405 open space/lid, mid-block connections, design guidelines (i.e., solar access, seating, active edges, etc.), and funding mechanisms for open space acquisition and improvement. Ms. Wilma said there will be an analysis of amenity incentives to determine how they might be updated to meet evolving market conditions and to integrate new priorities.

Ms. Wilma said the CAC and staff are interested in reviewing, and potentially consolidating, several sets of design guidelines throughout the Land Use Code. Priorities include focusing on

the public realm and pedestrian experience, neighborhood-specific design elements, the importance of site design and urban architecture, creativity, and flexibility.

Another topic to be included in the evaluation of Downtown alternatives is parking including minimum required parking, Old Bellevue parking, accessible parking, and non-Code issues (i.e., public parking supply and the potential for public garages). Additional topics to be covered through design guidelines are garbage collection, mechanical equipment, vendor carts and food trucks, vacant sites and buildings, and permitted uses.

Ms. Wilma said key issues identified by the focus groups and stakeholders have been referred to other departments for action including the Transportation, Parks and Community Services, and Development Services departments.

Ms. Wilma reviewed the overall schedule. Public scoping began in Winter 2012, the CAC began meeting in Spring 2013, Land Use audits were conducted throughout 2013, and the current focus is on analyzing and evaluating a range of alternatives and strategies.

Councilmember Robinson suggested that, as staff considers design incentives in lieu of fees, she hopes the Parks Department will be involved in those discussions. Ms. Wilma said staff will be looking at the range of opportunities from Downtown Park to the I-405 lid.

Mayor Balducci thanked staff for their work.

At 7:55 p.m., Mayor Balducci declared recess to the Regular Session.

Myrna L. Basich, MMC
City Clerk

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