

CITY OF BELLEVUE
BELLEVUE PLANNING COMMISSION
MEETING MINUTES

May 16, 2007
7:00 p.m.

Bellevue City Hall
City Council Conference Room 1E-113

COMMISSIONERS PRESENT: Chair Mathews, Vice-Chair Robertson, Commissioners Bonincontri, Bach, Ferris, Orrico, Sheffels

COMMISSIONERS ABSENT: None

STAFF PRESENT: Paul Inghram, Cheryl Kuhn, Janet Lewine, Stephanie Hewitt, Department of Planning and Community Development

GUEST SPEAKERS: Joel Glass, Anna Littlewood, Harry Andresen, Doug Leigh Todd LozierLozier, Joe Rosmann, Matt LaPine

RECORDING SECRETARY: Gerry Lindsay

1. CALL TO ORDER

The meeting was called to order at 7:03 p.m. by Chair Mathews who presided.

2. ROLL CALL

Upon the call of the roll, all Commissioners were present with the exception of Commissioner Robertson who arrived at 7:07 p.m.

3. APPROVAL OF AGENDA

The agenda was approved by consensus.

4. STAFF REPORTS – None

5. PUBLIC COMMENT

Julian Hirake, address not given, called attention to a letter he drafted and sent to the Planning Commission regarding the neighborhood livability issue. He noted that in addition to mega houses that are out of character with an existing subdivision, there is the issue of lot clustering in existing subdivisions, an approach that yields developments that are even more out of character. He asked the Commission to consider those types of infill actions.

6. COMMUNICATIONS FROM CITY COUNCIL, COMMUNITY COUNCILS, BOARDS AND COMMISSIONS

Commissioner Ferris reported that he sits on the Meydenbauer Park study group. To date the group has met only once, though an open house was held on May 15 and the group will meet again on May 17. Sasaki is the architect leading up the design effort.

Commissioner Ferris also reported that he is representing the Planning Commission in meetings

with ARCH in which the focus is on affordable and workforce housing on the Eastside. The group has met twice so far and has one more to go. Every Eastside jurisdiction is represented. The end result could be a group of incentives established by policy that could be adopted in each of the cities.

Chair Mathews informed the Commission that the Bel-Red corridor steering committee met on May 3 and selected the preferred alternative to be carried forward into the Final Environmental Impact Statement. The alternative selected is the one with the most housing and commercial. The group also made recommendations for where the housing, office and mixed use should locate within the corridor, and for how many transit stops there should be in the corridor and where they should be located.

Comprehensive Planning Manager Paul Inghram said staff is planning to update the various boards and commissions in the near future.

7. STUDY SESSION

A. Neighborhood Livability

Neighborhood Outreach Manager Cheryl Kuhn briefly recapped the Neighborhood Livability study process. To date staff has talked with community leaders, conducted firsthand research in the neighborhoods, investigated the types of approaches being used by other cities to address redevelopment and infill, and extensively reviewed city files pertaining to single family development since 2000.

Ms. Kuhn introduced the panelists, beginning with Joel Glass, a Bellevue homebuilder, resident of Enatai, and a member of the Transportation Commission; Anna Littlewood, a West Bellevue resident who is extensively involved in the arts community in Bellevue; Harry Andresen, an architect and resident of the Enatai area who formerly served on the Planning Commission; Doug Leigh, president of the West Bellevue Community Club, and architect, and co-chair of the new Meydenbauer Park CAC; Todd LozierLozier, a homebuilder and resident of Vuecrest; Joe Rosmann, president of the Surrey Downs Community Club and a builder specializing in remodeling; and Matt LaPine, president of the VuecrestVuecrest Homeowners Association.

Ms. Kuhn noted that West Bellevue as a neighborhood is undergoing intense redevelopment. She asked Mr. Leigh to describe the changes he has seen since 2000 and comment on what the local residents are saying about the changes. Mr. Leigh said the strongest evidence of change in the community is visible along 99th Avenue NE between NE 5th Street and NE 8th Street. He said he moved to the neighborhood 18 years ago at a time when the neighborhood was starting to look run down and had a lot of rentals with few owner-occupants. Since that time some 80 percent of the homes have been redeveloped. Since 2000 owner redevelopment has become uncommon; most of the redevelopment is occurring on speculation by developers. Full build-out of the sites is becoming the norm, so the setbacks are disappearing and the homes are built to the maximum footprint and height allowed. The result is incompatibility between the new and the old; 1950s one-story 600 square-foot homes are now adjacent to 4500 square-foot three-story houses.

Continuing, Mr. Leigh said local residents are complaining about construction activity disruption along with noise, trash, and lack of construction site maintenance. Many are concerned about expanding the impervious area of lots using tight-fitting pavers. The neighborhood believes that a five-foot side yard setback is not enough for large houses. Shading of houses has become an issue where a large, tall house is situated next to an older, smaller home; many long-time

residents are seeing their yard plants die and very little sun shining into their windows. Architectural incompatibility is an issue for many in the neighborhood. There are no incentives to make the new homes more energy efficient. The biggest issue residents talk about is the loss of trees and other vegetation which for so long have been part of the character of the neighborhood. Most of the redevelopment activity is resulting in the total clearing of lots. Many of the new homes are taking unfair advantage of grade issues to get very tall houses that exceed the maximum allowed height limit.

Ms. Kuhn asked Mr. Andresen to share some of what he said during the focus group discussions. He said the Enatai neighborhood has experienced a lot of redevelopment, which has resulted in a change in character. He allowed that while change is not necessarily a bad thing, it is happening without input from those who live in the neighborhood. Reinvestment in a community is good, but if unchecked it can completely change the character of an area. In many cases, perfectly solid and well-kept homes are being torn down and replaced by large, tall, and bulky houses that loom over their neighbors; this looming occurs in part because many of the lots in Enatai are narrow.

Continuing, Mr. Andresen said in many cases the new homes are reaching beyond the allowed height limit by building up the site with fill. The code measures height from the average finished grade. Too many living in Enatai are starting to say that they live in a tear-down community. People are starting to fear that it might happen to them next. In many cases when someone finds out that the house next door to him/her is to be torn down he/she ends up selling his/her home to the same developer, and then the neighbor on the other side does the same. It is not uncommon to see three good homes in a row lost to redevelopment. Many fear that the tear-down mentality will lead to homes not being kept up.

Mr. Andresen said he is a strong advocate of property rights, but suggested that there must be a way to treat infill and redevelopment in a way that will bring reason to the effort. Scale and height should be carefully considered. He added that on at least three occasions (he is aware of) a developer had absolutely no communication with the next door property owners; similar situations have ended up in very contentious relationships. Some builders have told the neighbors they have no obligation to talk to them.

Answering a question asked by Commissioner Ferris, Mr. Andresen allowed that some developers do open the lines of communication. Many are afraid that if they do so the neighbors will expect all kinds of things from them, but good communication is important.

Mr. Lozier said one of the first things his company does after buying a property is to go around to talk to the neighbors to inform them about the project. The neighbors will be asked what they would like to see done. It is the unknown that people fear most, and most are comfortable once they understand the process.

Mr. Lozier said he looks at the character of a neighborhood before building something new. He allowed that everything is market driven; builders are only trying to deliver the products the consumers want. Many who are seeking to buy a new home want to see a neighborhood of mostly new homes. One of the main problems is homes that are not appealing for one reason or another. Those units are generally constructed by people who are not really builders. When the market is hot everyone becomes a builder, and many of them buy stock plans from a book instead of trying to design something that will fit the site and the local neighborhood. Most try to get as many square feet as possible on a site.

Mr. Lozier stressed the need for developers to understand what the city requires and design

accordingly. Many of the monstrosities people have complained about could not even be built under the current codes and restrictions. Builders are, however, pushing things as far as they can and several are getting away with what is not actually allowed.

Ms. Kuhn asked Mr. LaPine to address the redevelopment that has occurred in the Vuecrest neighborhood and how people feel about it. He said nearly ten percent of the neighborhood has been in various stages of redevelopment over the last several years. It has, however, been a relatively positive experience. The difference has been that Vuecrest has a strong set of protective restrictions, a board with a will to enforce the restrictions consistently, and a strong community commitment. The CC&Rs in place go above and beyond Bellevue city codes. The neighborhood imposes 20-foot height limit; calculates setbacks in a way that increases them; calculates height based on the lower of the existing and proposed grade; and imposes view protections. The board puts a lot of time into design review. The community supports the board because the board acts in the best interests of the community; that is verified by regular surveys.

Mr. LaPine said the board encourages a regular flow of information and dialog with the community. City officials are invited to attend meetings and offer observations and information. The people who live in the community are connected with developers and the city via the board and directly. The association conducts roundtable sessions to discuss topics of interest to the community, operates a web forum, has a web site to which weekly updates are posted, and prints a monthly newsletter.

Commissioner Bonincontri asked how much of the redevelopment that has occurred in Vuecrest has been owner driven and how much has been developer driven. Mr. LaPine said the vast majority has been developer driven. Regular and open communication has been the key to success.

Answering a question asked by Commissioner Ferris, Mr. Lepine said Vuecrest was incorporated in 1947 with the CC&Rs. The CC&Rs were relaxed in 2001 by a majority vote of the community, though when some two-story homes began appearing the community rose up and rolled the CC&Rs back a few years later.

Mr. Glass was asked to provide some background about the redevelopment taking place in Bellevue, where it is coming from and what the market is. He said he gets frustrated with the term "mega house" because it is not really defined. To one person a mega house might be 4000 square feet, while to another it might mean 10,000 square feet. The real issue is bulk. The issue cannot be tackled just by addressing setbacks generally; where lots are long and narrow, increasing setbacks will result in odd shaped homes where all that will be visible from the street is the garage and a front door. The city code measures by average finished grade because there are so many sloped lots; the approach allows for the building up of a back yard without having homes sunk down in a hole, something frequently seen in Medina. Often on flat lots, the builder does not want to haul away the dirt so he piles it up instead.

Mr. Glass said tree retention is a major concern in neighborhoods such as Lochleven and Bridle Trails. However, communities such as Somerset and Woodridge prefer to have any trees that block their views removed.

Mr. Glass said he would not want to see any approach taken that would limit the rights of a property owner to build on their site a home that fits all Bellevue codes. Many do not want to live in a 1950s rambler that does not offer the types of rooms, ceiling heights, plumbing, heating, electrical and other amenities modern homes afford.

Ms. Littlewood allowed that change is essential; in the United States things are eternally changing. The problem for local neighborhoods, however, is that change is happening so fast. She said when she moved to Bellevue 25 years ago, Bellevue was referred to as an edge city. It is now an edgy city. She said the West Bellevue neighborhood she moved into was definitely 1950s in character, with soft edges and many trees. The majority of the lots were, and continue to be, very small. When a 6000 square-foot home goes in adjacent to the 1950s homes, there is most definitely a different skyline, a different light factor, and a different privacy factor. Many in the neighborhood have seen that happen on both sides of them; some have it on three sides of their homes. The majority of the changes have occurred in the last two years, and the history of the neighborhood is being wrenched out.

Ms. Littlewood suggested that the regulations could be reviewed relative to the speed factor, the fact that things are happening in such a concentrated way. No one who has paid taxes to the city for 53 years should be forced to live in the middle of a building block while the homes on all sides of them are torn down and rebuilt. West Bellevue used to be full of bird songs, but that is being lost as the lots are cleared of all vegetation.

Ms. Kuhn said Surrey Downs as a neighborhood has for some time existed on the edge of redevelopment and is now starting to see some of it. Mr. Rosmann said his wife's family lives in Maine in a historic home, which by city ordinance can never be torn down. He said he moved to Bellevue from Illinois where he lived in a very old house which was totally upgraded but without losing its historic character. It is possible to remodel older homes into newer homes without losing their character.

Mr. Rosmann said the Surrey Downs community in the early part of the 20th Century consisted of rural farms. A major building surge kicked off in 1957 led by families of modest means, thus the typical home was only 1200 to 1500 square feet. Homes constructed in the 1960s and 1970s gradually became larger; on some of the hills the existing structures are three stories, but they are very discreet because the first floor is built into the ground. Surrey Downs became a close-knit community with everyone knowing everyone else. Over time the community has changed, but the change has occurred slowly. In the early 1990s the social structure of the community began to change as new families moved in and older families moved out, but the village atmosphere remained.

The Surrey Downs Community Club currently has as strong a membership support as it has ever had. The threat of having Sound Transit running through the middle of the neighborhood has rekindled a sense of values for the residents. What it is working on is how to come together regarding a sense of values and a process by which everyone can feel comfortable with the changes everyone knows is coming. The neighborhood is working on a process that will balance market forces with perceived social expectations of what is right in terms of style, size, character, and cultural sensibilities of what adds to the whole. Many in the community would welcome the opportunity to work closely with the city in holding up the Surrey Downs neighborhood as a model for how to do it right.

Commissioner Bonincontri asked what values the neighborhood has established. Mr. Rosmann said they are being developed, but the focus is on a sense of right scale, and a sense of all surrounding property owners are comfortable with a change being introduced.

Commissioner Bonincontri said as an architect she is aware that the market demands for home amenities is changing. People want entertainment rooms and a place to exercise. Some of that may change given the need to be more "green" and the need to be with other people. She asked if over time the need for community will result in smaller homes in order to be fashionable. Mr.

LozierLozier said everything cycles, though each time ideas come back they are slightly different. Currently, the families coming into West Bellevue want homes of at least 4000 square feet, with a bathroom for each of the secondary bedrooms, a recreation room, and many want a media room. Builders with new homes of less than 4000 square feet are finding them sitting on the market for some time because the market wants something else. The market demands are not likely to change for at least the next five years.

Mr. LozierLozier said good architecture incorporates articulations and different rooflines that balance well with the lot. In Medina and Clyde Hill, where people want really big houses, the stringent height and setback restrictions are forcing them to construct homes with flat roofs that are little more than large boxes.

Commissioner Ferris pointed out that in Vuecrest there are CC&Rs in place that everyone living there has agreed to live by. He asked if an existing neighborhood that does not currently have CC&Rs in place could create them after the fact. Mr. Andresen suggested that city-adopted development standards could somewhat achieve the same result. It would be very difficult to bring CC&Rs to existing neighborhoods. Mr. Leigh said an incentive-based system encouraging people to do the right thing would be the way to go; the rub would be in having everyone agree on to what the right thing is.

Answering a question asked by Ms. Littlewood, Mr. Leigh said Kirkland is looking at sight line, light line, and floor area ratio as ways to deal with overbuilding on lots.

Mr. Andresen thought it would be good to consider incentives for remodeling and adding on to existing homes over tearing them down. Commissioner Bonincontri pointed out that some states charge a fee for tearing down an existing home, and the fees collected are used to construct affordable housing; that could be one incentive utilized.

Mr. Andresen noted that Bellevue measures height from the average finished grade; changing to average existing grade, which is what most other jurisdictions do, would help with the height issue to a large degree. He added that the very home styles that are being torn down in Enatai and other areas are very popular in California.

Mr. Leigh said the notion of creating a heritage district was raised by the West Bellevue Community Club. Such a district would function similar to an overlay and could take the place of CC&Rs.

Mr. Rosmann proposed investigating commonality as an important element of character. What brings about character in a community is not how one house looks but how several houses up and down a street look, not too big, not too small, not too tall and so forth.

Mr. LaPine said CC&Rs are just the tip of the iceberg, though they are most obvious and visible. What is less obvious is a board of directors willing to enforce the rules consistently and persistently over time. The biggest part of the iceberg is the support given by the entire community that set the standards in the first place.

Mr. Rosmann said Surrey Downs is not looking for a set of hard and fast rules but rather a set of guidelines with which the people can feel comfortable..

Commissioner Sheffels commented that the city used to spend more time focused on subarea plans. She raised the notion of specific neighborhoods, like Vuecrest, Surrey Downs or West Bellevue, forming a citizens' committee to come up with guidelines or standards that try to

describe their community and what should be preserved. Everything does not need to be preserved, and the group could agree on what changes should be made and bring their ideas to the full community for discussion and approval. Mr. Leigh said such a process would need to be facilitated by the city.

Ms. Littlewood suggested Surrey Downs would be an ideal neighborhood for such an approach. The setup in West Bellevue is quite different. The changes have occurred there so quickly that the historical element is rapidly disappearing. However, facilitating for the advantage of the future of the neighborhood should be considered. The neighborhood already is very different from what it was, and the new community members could work together to set a standard.

Mr. Rosmann said one approach would be to require builders constructing a home on speculation to gather the neighborhood to talk about their plans, though not necessarily to prohibit them from proceeding.

Mr. Leigh said one component that must be kept in the forefront of everyone's thinking is the environment. The focus must be on 50 years or more into the future rather than just on the present, because the cumulative impacts will affect both the land and the resources. Taking away from the environment is going in the wrong direction; the approach should be to add to it.

Chair Mathews pointed out that it is much easier for small communities to come together to decide what look and feel their area should have. For larger communities, such as Lake Hills, there is far more diversity, and the housing market is much different.

Ms. Kuhn sought direction from the Commission about future lines of inquiry. She noted that the need to preserve trees and vegetation is a major theme being raised by Bellevue residents; the Council is hearing about that issue from citizens almost every Monday night. Other issues of prime concern are size and scale, retention of neighborhood character, local control, and construction and environmental impacts. She said she will be bringing back to the Commission thoughts on those specific areas.

Commissioner Sheffels suggested the Commission should be updated with regard to the subarea plans.

Commissioner Orrico said the issues that resonated most with her were the need to have the community involved early on and the need for design standards. She said she is not comfortable with the idea of incenting remodels.

Commissioner Sheffels said she would shy away from creating historic overlays for neighborhoods. There are other ways to preserve neighborhood character.

Commissioner Bonincontri said she could support an approach in which the city facilitates getting the various neighborhoods to come together to have a voice in their future. Commissioner Sheffels agreed and suggested the permitting process could require communication, possibly triggered by a certain scale.

Commissioner Ferris observed that some of the issues raised toy with private property rights. He suggested it would be very helpful for staff to vet some of the proposed solutions for what is legal and what is not before the Commission spends time focused on what cannot be done anyway. Change happens, and most of the concerns being raised by the citizens are tied to change. Change needs to be regulated so it is comfortable for everyone, but it cannot be prevented; things will simply not always be the way they have always been.

8. NEW BUSINESS – None

9. OLD BUSINESS

Commissioner Ferris reiterated the need to develop a definition of “urban village.”

Mr. Inghram reported that everyone is on board for holding the Commission retreat on July 11.

Commissioner Robertson asked for an update regarding the KG Investments proposal. Mr. Inghram said work is progressing to define more of the particulars about the street connection and how a phased approach would be implemented. The city has provided KG Investments with detailed information about the potential street plans for NE 4th Street and 120th Avenue NE and is now waiting to hear from them about changes to their development concepts. Once there is more information in hand, the Commission will be provided with an update.

10. PETITIONS AND COMMUNICATIONS

Mr. Julian Hirake, address not given, referred to Attachment A of his letter submitted to the Commission. He identified the location of the Kimberly Park neighborhood and explained that it has only one access. The plat was developed in the mid 1960s and is fully built out with the exception of one lot. The lots range in size between 10,000 square feet and 15,000 square feet. The original developer owned all of the property, including the area called Government Lot 3 which encompasses a very large ravine with steep slopes and erosion hazards. The property was sold to investors who now are proposing a 15-lot subdivision with private roads and lots of about 6000 square feet using density transfers. The private roads are being counted as part of the lot area, and retaining walls of up to 15 feet tall are being proposed to facilitate the creation of building pads. A variance is also being asked for the front yard setback. The infill is completely out of character with the rest of Kimberly Park. Kimberly Park has an active homeowners association and a private park owned by the local residents. The new develop will not be part of the homeowners association, but it will be very difficult to keep them from using the park. The roads proposed to serve the new development are so narrow that they afford no on-street parking and will be very difficult for emergency vehicles to access.

11. ADJOURNMENT

Chair Mathews adjourned the meeting at 9:16 p.m.

Staff to the Planning Commission

Date

Chair of the Planning Commission

Date