DATE: April 23, 2007

TO: Bel-Red Corridor Project Steering Committee

FROM: Dan Stroh, PCD (452-5255)

SUBJECT: Discussion Paper on Building Height—Agenda Item 5

Issue: Should the FEIS consider additional building heights in some portions of the study area, i.e. heights above those described in the Project Glossary and assumed in the DEIS?

Background
Two property owners have come forward to the committee and staff with requests for considering additional height beyond the assumptions in the DEIS. Wright Runstad, the current owners of a large portion of the former Safeway site, have indicated they envision office building heights potentially as high as 130 feet, or up to ten stories. This is in an area identified by the Committee as “Mixed Use Office/Housing,” within a transit node, where the Glossary defines heights up to six stories, roughly 75 feet. Crescent View Investments, new owner of the former Angelo’s Nursery site, has developed a residential building height alternative up to 150 feet (including a bonus for underground parking). This is in an area identified by the Committee as “Mixed Use Housing/Retail,” within a transit node, where the Glossary identifies building heights up to five stories.

The five to six story height ceilings identified in the Glossary and assumed in the project DEIS are within the upper range of heights found elsewhere on the Eastside, outside of Downtown Bellevue. Heights beyond 75 feet are defined as “high-rise” in the International Building Code, and typically graduate to concrete and steel building materials. These heights also carry significant implications about urban form and other impacts, as set forth below.

Urban form and its impact on community character and identity: There is no direct relationship between building height and density; building height is a matter of desired urban form. The same 300,000 square foot building on a five-acre site could be expressed as a three-story building covering 46% of the site, a five-story building covering 28% of the site, or a ten-story building covering 14% of the site (all exclusive of parking). The density/intensity in all three cases is the same, 1.38 FAR. The ten-story building would be much more prominent, and in staff’s experience may be perceived as denser by many members of the public. However, the higher form could “free up” more land for open space.

The siting and distribution of mid-rise and high-rise buildings can become a very prominent part of a community’s identity. Some urban critics assert that that where high-rise buildings occur, they should be limited to iconic structures or public buildings—e.g., cathedrals, iconic towers, major public buildings. This logic has been used to prohibit higher building forms in large portions of cities like Washington, D.C. and Paris.
Others assert that placed in the right locations, commercial and residential high-rise buildings can provide a sense of focus, the feeling that a community has a well defined and carefully planned center. By contrast, an urban form of high-rise buildings distributed across a series of locations with no strong sense of focus can give the impression of unplanned and haphazard growth. Because they are visible from distant locations, high-rise buildings can strongly affect community character and identity, for better or worse.

**Visual impacts:** Closely related to urban form is the visual impact of higher buildings, as viewed from surrounding areas. Mid-rise and high-rise buildings can soar above the horizon line; they can block valued views of mountains, water and other amenities; they can be perceived as looming and intrusive to some neighbors. To other neighbors, high-rise buildings can be perceived as an attractive view in their own right. To better gauge these types of impacts, visual simulations are typically conducted at the planning stage. Significant viewpoints are selected, and high-rise forms are drawn to simulate the visual impact of how views would change under various scenarios. Wright Runstad has begun to conduct some visual analysis of added height on its site; more visual analysis is needed to fully evaluate potential impacts.

**Human scale:** The well-known Dutch urban design expert, Jan Gehl, has stated that buildings above six stories by nature fall outside the human scale. He draws the six-story threshold based on the logic that beyond this height, building occupants can not clearly see and converse with people at street level. Others assert that the human scale is most critical at the street wall, the public-private interface where the building meets the sidewalk. In Downtown Bellevue and in many other cities, the theory is that if the ground level is well delineated, with an inviting pedestrian interface, the critical human scale can be established even for higher buildings.

**Differentiated economic niche/Downtown competition:** One of the principles endorsed by City Council at the beginning of this project was that Bel-Red should complement, rather than compete with, Downtown Bellevue and other areas of the city. The adopted planning principle is as follows: “Differentiated Economic Niche: Bel-Red should provide for future growth of jobs and firms that have significant potential for expansion, and which are not well accommodated in other parts of the city.” Buildings approaching 100 feet in height or more begin to be comparable to building heights in downtown Bellevue. For example, in the Downtown-MU zoning district, maximum heights for office buildings are 100 feet. If additional building height is considered for Bel-Red, additional evaluation would be needed to determine whether the resulting buildings would indeed be meeting a unique market niche for Bellevue.

**Relationship to implementation strategy:** Additional height may be considered as one factor in the implementation strategy for delivering on the preferred Bel-Red project vision. The Committee has previously discussed the extensive infrastructure and urban amenities that will be needed to realize the vision of a redeveloped Bel-Red area. It is anticipated that all development will contribute to this package of improvements, through mechanisms to be determined as part of the implementation strategy.

Often the allowance for additional height is handled as a land use incentive, and is granted in exchange for providing a higher level of public benefit than would otherwise be required for new development. For example, Downtown Bellevue has had an “Amenity Incentive System” in place for many years; only by contributing to certain public amenities can a development meet its full FAR
and height potential. This market incentive approach is one strategy the Committee may want to consider in exchange for an additional building height allowance in Bel-Red.

**Staff Recommendation**

Should the Committee wish to consider additional height in any area of Bel-Red beyond the assumptions made in the DEIS, additional evaluation in the FEIS will be needed. Staff recommends that should the Committee wish to consider greater building heights, that the Committee direct that the FEIS evaluate the potential impacts of additional height, at various levels up to a “bookend” of 150 feet, in designated transit nodes. A decision to allow additional height in any area would be premature at this time, but evaluating this in the FEIS leaves the opportunity open for the Committee to consider additional height in its final recommendations.