



MEMORANDUM

DATE: December 1, 2006

TO: Bel-Red Corridor Project Steering Committee

FROM: Kevin O'Neill, Transportation (425-452-4064)
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SUBJECT: Issues relating to selecting a preferred alternative

At the November 14 Steering Committee meeting, representatives from Wright Runstad presented some of their early thinking about how the recently-purchased Safeway site could redevelop in the future, contingent of course on the outcome of the Bel-Red planning process. They acknowledged that they were still in the early stages of thinking about future development of the site, and were open to receiving comments from the committee.

The presentation by Wright Runstad raised several key issues that will relate to the committee's ultimate selection of a preliminary and final preferred alternative. The purpose of this memo is to outline and analyze some of these issues. These will be further discussed by the committee at the December 7 meeting. The intent of this agenda item is not to discuss the Wright Runstad presentation or site plan specifically, but rather address some of the issues and questions that the presentation raised, which are applicable not only to this site, but to other parts of the corridor as well. These issues will need to be addressed as we work toward a preferred land use alternative for the study area.

The issues and analysis of each are outlined below:

1. ***Building Height:*** During the presentation, Wright Runstad staff expressed interest in a variation of heights for buildings on the site, and that they envisioned building heights potentially ranging from 75 to 130 feet. They also mentioned constructing buildings potentially as high as 8-10 stories. In the objectives the committee adopted (attached), under the Land Use category you endorsed an objective calling for "Appropriate scale of development in the area". During discussion of this issue, building heights more in the 4-6 story level were referenced. One of the key principles framing this project from the beginning is that development in this area would complement, but not compete with, Downtown Bellevue. One of the principles (attached) endorsed by City Council at the beginning of this project stated that Bel Red should provide a "***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 more comparable to building heights in downtown Bellevue; for example, in the Downtown-MU zoning district, maximum heights for office buildings are 100 feet (residential buildings can be built to 200 feet in height) The underlying policy issue here is what constitutes 'competition' with development planned for Downtown. Is it form (height), or intensity (FAR), or both?

A related issue is what the visual impacts of additional height would be, particularly from adjacent residential areas. We have asked Wright Runstad to prepare a visual analysis of their proposal to assist you in your evaluation of this issue.

The land use forms currently in the action alternatives do not contemplate building heights of more than 6 stories, as noted in the glossary accompanying the alternatives (attached). In determining a preferred alternative, the committee will need to assess whether it wants to recommend greater building heights in certain locations, and under what circumstances (for example, only allowed in light rail station areas).

2. ***Density and Transit Oriented Development:*** A related issue to building height is overall density, in particular planned density within certain parts of the corridor. One of the land use objectives previously endorsed by the committee stated that “Land use takes advantage of HCT stations (mixed use nodes)” This endorses a “nodal” development pattern, where land use would be concentrated in certain areas of the corridor, instead of uniformly spread at lower densities throughout the area, as is largely the case today. As has been discussed with the committee before, concentrated development near transit stations, often known as transit-oriented development (TOD), can have the benefits of taking best advantage of transit (by locating a large number of residents and jobs close to transit stations) and by helping the transit system achieve peak performance by providing opportunities for higher ridership. Wright Runstad staff mentioned that integrating a light rail station was part of their thinking in terms of the future development of their site.

All of the land use alternatives approved by the committee have development nodes located in close proximity to potential light rail stations. However, none of the alternatives contemplate the specific level of focused growth and density in a specific area as presented by Wright Runstad (Alternatives 1 and 3 both have development nodes at this general location, but not with the development intensity noted in their presentation). This raises the question of how much future growth should be clustered in specific parts of the corridor. It would be possible, for example, within the development program options approved by the committee to likely accommodate all of the new development for the entire corridor around station locations, and not change the land use pattern in the rest of the area. All of the alternatives, while having development nodes near stations, also contemplate land use change occurring outside of these nodes. If the committee decides it wants to cluster the vast majority of development in a more concentrated form around future stations (which would be beneficial for the transit system, and potentially the street system), this will have implications for how land use is considered outside of the station areas. This issue will be discussed more in the following section.

3. ***Development Program:*** As you are aware, each of the “action” alternatives has a specific development program attached with it, relating to future land use contemplated between now and 2030. Alternative 1 assumes 3.5 million square feet of commercial development and 3,500 housing units; Alternative 2 assumes 2.5 million square feet of commercial development and 5,000 housing units; and Alternative 3 assumes 4.5 million square feet of commercial development and 5,000 housing units. For purposes of preparing the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS), staff and the consultant team distributed future

land use within the corridor based on these overall development programs, and based on the general distribution of land uses as outlined in each alternative.

During the Wright Runstad presentation, they stated that they were contemplating 800 to 1,000 residential units at the site, and office floor area ratios (FARs) of 2.0, or potentially greater. An FAR of this magnitude spread over the 37 acre site could result in well over 2 million square feet of office space. The number of residential units is generally consistent with Alternative 1, but no alternative contemplated this level of office development at this site. More generally, it also raises the question of how much of the overall development program should be absorbed at any one location or area within the corridor (this is related to the density question explored above). The amount of new commercial development in the entire 900-acre corridor, under the development program options, ranges from 2.5 million square feet to 4.5 million; at the low end of the range, the preliminary Wright Runstad proposal could put almost all of that on that a single 37 acre site.

The potential amount of redevelopment intensity that occurs in any one place in the corridor leads to the issue of what could be expected to change, or redevelopment, within the corridor as a whole during the next 25 years, and how that redevelopment would be phased. Under all of the alternatives, it is assumed that some of the existing businesses and types of land uses will remain in the area, but all of the alternatives also contemplate some change occurring in many parts of the study area, not just in certain development nodes. The committee has also expressed support for using development incentives as a way to help implement amenities in the area, such as open space or stream corridor restoration. However, this strategy will only be effective if a critical mass of property owners has the opportunity to consider higher development intensities on their properties. If a large amount of the area's overall development program is devoted to a small, focused area of the corridor, these opportunities for development incentives would be limited to just those sites. This has implications for both the area's land use patterns, and the package of amenities (and ways that they could be implemented) that will be planned for the area as a whole.

4. ***Transportation Capacity and Connectivity:*** As the committee is aware, the existing lack of a complete and inter-connected transportation network is a constraint on development, and adding capacity to the transportation system overall will be an important part of being able to accommodate the future development program under any alternative. In their presentation on their preliminary thinking about the site, Wright Runstad showed a new street grid being added within the boundaries of the site. This is consistent with the concepts shown in the alternatives, and would greatly increase transportation access within that general area. However, the concept as presented also shows the site being screened off from surrounding development by using landscaping, etc. In some cases this makes sense (for example, there is a major utility line running along the eastern half of the site along 124th Avenue NE, that may lend itself to a greenbelt). The development concepts also are developed assuming that the site should be buffered from adjoining uses. This may be true in the short term, but perhaps not as true in the long term (depending on the overall vision, and what happens to adjoining properties). In order to enhance overall mobility, opportunities to extend this street grid (here or elsewhere in the corridor) should be considered as part of the final preferred vision, as long as it is possible to do so without disrupting riparian corridors or other critical areas.

Another issue is the ability of the transportation system to accommodate a large amount of development in any one portion of the planning area, and during what timeframe. As noted, while two of the action alternatives assume a potentially large amount of redevelopment in this general area, none of the alternatives contemplate the magnitude suggested in the presentation. Even with the planned transportation infrastructure improvements, such as extension of NE 16th and capacity additions on 120th and 124th, there will be major transportation challenges in the area. Previous work (such as the Overlake Hospital/NE 10th Extension EIS) showed major intersection problems at the eastern end of downtown, such as NE 12th/112th and NE 8th/112th. Since Wright Runstad's preliminary site plan shows more development potentially occurring on the site than any of the existing alternatives, this suggests that more thinking about transportation improvements, and how they are financed, would likely be required.

The other issue that this raises is the timing of development tied to infrastructure improvements. Our overall timeline for the Bel-Red project is 2030, but we know that development, and infrastructure improvements, will occur in phases between now and then. How this is done, and how land use capacity is tied to transportation capacity, will be a fundamental issue in terms of how the ultimate preferred vision is implemented. This issue is not unique to the Safeway site or the Wright Runstad preliminary proposal, but it does help raise this as an issue due to Wright Runstad's stated development interests and proposed level of development.

5. ***Internal vs. External Orientation and the Ability of the Site to Serve as Catalyst:*** Related to the issue of transportation connectivity is the overall orientation of the proposed preliminary site plan. To the extent that this site—critical in terms of its geographic location, potential contiguity to a transit station, and size—orients its uses internally and buffers itself or turns its back on surrounding uses, it will be experienced more as an isolated, stand-alone project, rather than part of a larger, coherent whole. Further, the more the site feels isolated, the less likely its development will help to catalyze desired changes in land use nearby.

This is a difficult balancing act, given that some nearby uses are not likely to change in the near to mid-term, such as the Coca Cola site, the Safeway ice cream plant, and the Metro maintenance base. The task is to balance the need to buffer these adjacent and potentially less compatible uses in the near term, while still creating a graceful transition with a larger area and community context.

Again, the purpose of this memo is not to suggest specific changes to the Wright Runstad preliminary proposal, but rather to identify issues and questions raised by the presentation. These issues will help frame not only how the committee chooses to think about this area in developing your preferred alternative, but also how you think about the future vision of the corridor as a whole.

If you have any questions prior to the meeting please let us know.

Attachments:

- Steering Committee Objectives
- City Council Planning Principles
- Bel-Red Draft Land Use Alternatives: Glossary of Terms