

Putting Together Bellevue

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Once strictly a bedroom community for Seattle, Bellevue, Washington, has emerged as one of the most dynamic mid-sized cities in the United States.

Today, construction cranes dot the skyline of Bellevue, Washington, as numerous high-rise office, apartment, and condominium structures rise in the city of nearly 120,000.



DAVID JOHANSON / VAQUEZ/BIG PICTURE PHOTO

CONSTRUCTION CRANES DOT the skyline of the city of Bellevue, Washington, the most visible aspect of a spate of construction that is expected to total more than 2.2 million square feet (204,386 sq m) of office space—much of it already spoken for—and more than 2,500 apartments and condominiums. All this new development going on in the city of nearly 120,000 is adhering to a plan that dates back a quarter of a century, a time when Bellevue was clearly a product of the 1960s-era mentality that dictated that the city should be designed around the car.

At that time, Bellevue's first planning director, Fred Herman, followed the conventions of the day when the suburban community began to redevelop in the years following 1950 and had only 6,000 residents. The city was laid out with 600-by-600-foot (55.7-by-55.7-m) superblocks, a grid of four- and six-lane roads, and major amounts of street-level parking. In aerial photos from 30 years ago, Bellevue looks much like a giant parking lot punctuated by low-rise offices and the odd row of storefronts. The city had sidewalks, but they seemed more like an afterthought; the superblocks made a one-block stroll look like a marathon.

But in 1980, city planners such as Matt Terry offered a different vision. Bellevue had by then grown to some 73,000 residents. While it clearly remained a car-based town, tastes in city planning had changed due to the emerging success of compact, pedestrian- and

transit-themed municipalities such as Portland, Oregon. As a result, a downtown plan put into effect during the early 1980s mapped out a sharp course correction for Bellevue—as a city that could rely less on the car and more on transit and walking. Parking lots and low-rise development would give way to higher-density offices. Housing—condominiums and apartments—would bring people to the city core to live, creating a 24-hour-a-day municipality instead of the largely 9-to-5 place that existed. This influx of people was expected to draw world-class shopping, fine restaurants, and nightlife venues.

Now, the Bellevue skyline is visible for miles and is punctuated by a dozen high rises comprising 20-plus stories, with more of the same under construction. Hundreds of condo and apartment units built in recent years are filled with young professionals who work at the sprawling Microsoft campus in the nearby community of Redmond, as well as middle-aged city dwellers. Bellevue—once known chiefly for its landmark shopping center, Bellevue Square—has new retail on the horizon, plus half a dozen new nightclubs.

Representative of the new look of Bellevue is a \$500 million project now under construction at the entrance to the downtown core. When completed in phases over the course of this year and the first quarter of 2010, the Bravem will encompass 750,000 square feet (69,677 sq m) of office space, 35 upscale retail shops, a department store, four restaurants, a 37,000-square-foot (3,437-sq-m) athletic club, two residential towers with 455 condominiums, and, at the heart of the project, an outdoor urban village.

Tenants at the Bravem will range from Jimmy Choo, Louis Vuitton, Bottega Veneta, and Hermès to a three-story Neiman Marcus, the first full-fledged foray of the Dallas-based luxury department store into the Pacific Northwest. Ten of the 12 highest-income zip codes in the greater Puget Sound area form an arc directly adjacent to Bellevue. “Neiman studied both Seattle and Bellevue, and determined their sales would be 12 to 25 percent higher in Bellevue,” says Tom Woodworth, senior investment director for Schnitzer West, developer of the Bravem.

Additional recent or in-progress projects in Bellevue include City Center Plaza, a 26-story

office tower; a 350-room Hyatt Hotel expected to open by June; and Washington Square, a two-tower complex with 400 condos and two floors of retail.

The Bravern and a number of other projects in downtown Bellevue—notably Lincoln Square, which opened in 2006—favor a mixed-use or “vertical village” approach combining condominiums or hotels with restaurants, shopping, and offices. This approach, which creates a livelier mix of activities than single-use structures is credited with helping downtown Bellevue.

Leasing activity is keeping up with new structures, if not outpacing it—so far. Microsoft, for example, has leased all the office space at the Bravern, and will bring in some 2,300 employees, in addition to 15 floors of office space the company had previously agreed to lease in Lincoln Square, a 28-story tower completed in the summer of 2007. Expedia, an online travel company that spun off from Microsoft in 1999, is leasing room for 1,700 employees in Tower 333, a 20-story building that just finished construction. Yahoo also is leasing approximately 60,000 square feet (5,574 sq m) in downtown Bellevue.

As to how Bellevue managed to drag itself up from concrete-covered suburban backwater to mid-sized metropolis, luck played a role, along with foresight. Bellevue, for instance, found itself in a prime location as the Seattle area grew. One interstate (I-405) ran right through it, while another (I-90) lay along its southern flank. The city also sat between two bridges that crossed Lake Washington into the Seattle metropolitan area, so it formed a natural transportation nexus in an area where the topography of hills and water create few natural transportation corridors.

In addition, a suburban megamall called Evergreen East, planned for a site some five miles (8 km) northeast of downtown Bellevue, was scrapped in the late 1970s. This gave Bellevue developer Kemper Freeman, who with his father owned an open-air shopping center in Bellevue, the space to redevelop his property into Bellevue Square, which today is a 180-store center in the heart of downtown Bellevue that annually draws 16 million shoppers. Bellevue Square’s success, in turn, spurred Freeman to invest in retail and office development adjacent to Bellevue

Square, helping to create an increasingly urban core.

On top of this, the site earmarked for the planned Evergreen East shopping center became, in 1986, the site of the first four buildings for Microsoft; currently, about 35,000 people work at the tech company’s sprawling campus.

Bellevue’s recent transition is also attributable to vision and planning, notes Leslie Lloyd, president of the Bellevue Downtown Association, a business advocacy group. “The die was cast in the early 1980s with the downtown plan. That put an end to [battles] about whether we would allow growth or not. Setting a hard boundary around where downtown would be—and sticking to it—gave property owners the knowledge that they would get value for their property.” As a result, property owners have built generally dense, high-end offices, retail space, and housing, knowing that they would not have to compete with too much lower-density suburban construction.

For years after the downtown plan was codified, little development appeared to support the vision after an initial flurry of construction in the mid-1980s. Some of the properties that did emerge retained the tendency to be self-contained units, without any street presence. A pedestrian corridor that cuts east–west perpendicular to the city’s largest streets remains underused, while the superblocks continue to flummox efforts to make Bellevue a pedestrian-oriented city.

“The pedestrian corridor remains fundamentally important and we’re still working on that,” says Terry. “We hope to launch a ‘great streets’ initiative, with design guidelines and incentives and public investment to expand the right-of-way and include more amenities and landscaping, perhaps with ‘refuge areas’ where a café can have outdoor seating.”

Nor has Bellevue been recession-proof, having weathered downturns when the dot.com crash and the 9/11 attacks shut down development. To date, the market for office space remains strong, with vacancies running at 7 percent.



A \$500 project now under construction at the entrance to Bellevue’s downtown core will include office space, a three-story Neiman Marcus, upscale retail shops, four restaurants, two residential towers, and an outdoor urban village.

Things have turned out so well, in fact, that city planners say they are turning their attention to an underdeveloped stretch of low-rise buildings northeast of downtown Bellevue. Upgrading that area with better infrastructure and, in time, development is expected to help visually link downtown Bellevue with the swarm of activity around the Microsoft campus.

Traffic congestion and parking woes remain a source of anxiety in Bellevue, a hangover from a car-centered design that created too few cross-streets and alleys. Nonetheless, planners have high hopes that within the next decade work will commence on a light-rail system linking Bellevue and the Microsoft campus to Seattle’s nearly finished light-rail line. The light-rail line is opening this year in two stages: the 13.9-mile (22.2-km) segment from Westlake Station to Tukwila International Boulevard Station by summer and a 1.7-mile (2.7-km) extension to Seattle-Tacoma International Airport by the end of the year. “That would have remarkable long-term implications for downtown Bellevue—all of them positive,” remarks Terry. **UL**

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