

CITY OF BELLEVUE
BELLEVUE PLANNING COMMISSION
MEETING MINUTES

September 27, 2006
7:00 p.m.

Bellevue City Hall
City Council Conference Room 1E-113

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

COMMISSIONERS ABSENT: Commissioner Ferris

STAFF PRESENT: Paul Inghram, Janet Lewine, Department of Planning and Community Development

GUEST SPEAKERS: Leonard McGhee, Sound Transit

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 Bonincontri, who arrived at 7:10 p.m., and Commissioner Ferris, who was excused.

3. APPROVAL OF AGENDA

The agenda was approved by consensus.

4. STAFF REPORTS – None

5. PUBLIC COMMENT – None

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

Mayor Grant Degginger informed the Commission that the City Council is actively involved in having a voice in the Sound Transit East Link project. At its September 25 meeting, the Council discussed having the boards and commissions more involved. The choice of a high capacity transit link to the Eastside is pretty much settled, but there needs to be a focus on route alternatives, what it should look like and what the impacts of the various alternatives will be.

7. STUDY SESSION

A. Sound Transit

Senior Planner Paul Inghram stated that the Sound Transit East Link project has a general importance to the city but also has significance for some of the planning projects that are under way, notably the Wilburton/NE 8th Street and Bel-Red corridor studies. The project could also

have impacts for the Surrey Downs neighborhood, the Crossroads and Overlake areas, and the downtown area.

Leonard McGhee, Sound Transit Light Rail Department, said there are three segments to the East Link project and explained that he is the manager for the section between downtown Bellevue to downtown Redmond. East Link will connect Seattle with the Eastside via the I-90 bridges. The scoping process is well under way and there have been a number of meetings with the public. The overall process is a long way from yielding any final decisions relative to specific alignments.

The project timeline has several key milestones. In December, the Sound Transit board will be asked to identify the alternatives to be studied in the Draft Environmental Impact Statement (DEIS). The DEIS will be developed during 2007 and will culminate in a draft product in the first quarter of 2008; that product will be put out for public comment. Following that, the board will be asked to make a decision regarding a preferred alternative, which will launch the Final Environmental Impact Statement process. The preliminary engineering phase will then be ushered in which will result in board adoption of the project in the first quarter of 2009 and a record of decision from the Federal Transit Administration. Everything is predicated on positive vote of the public in the fall of 2007.

Mr. McGhee said more than 200 people attended the Bellevue scoping meeting held at Meydenbauer Center. The meeting was also focused on the Regional Transportation Investment District process. There was a lot of good discussion and representation by local neighborhood groups. The 30-day public comment period on the scoping process will close on October 2. One focus of the scoping process is the elimination of certain issues from detailed study, especially those addressed in previous studies.

Mr. McGhee explained that light rail is defined as an electric railway powered by an overhead power source. Other systems operate diesel engines or receive power from a third rail. Light rail systems are versatile and flexible enough to run at street level, through tunnels or on elevated rights-of-way; they can be expanded as demand increases. At-grade operations offer lower construction costs and are more easily accessible.

Commissioner Robertson asked if the system will be utilizing the electrical cables that already run through Seattle. Mr. McGhee said a different electrical power system will be needed. The wiring system currently in the Seattle transit tunnel will have to be changed out. There will be joint operations with buses and light rail in the tunnel initially, but eventually it will be light rail only.

Answering a question asked by Commissioner Robertson, Mr. McGhee said for the most part the East Link system will operate on a dedicated right-of-way. There are, however, some alternatives that include some right-of-way sharing. In those instances, the at-grade systems are given signal priority. At-grade systems have the added advantage of allowing for better integration with street design and landscape features, and increase the visibility of the system.

The benefit of operating light rail in tunnels is the elimination of geographic constraints such as hills and dense urban areas. Tunnel configurations also minimize the impacts on roadways and adjacent properties. Elevated systems also reduce the impacts on existing roadways and adjacent properties given that their footprint is less than at-grade systems. Elevated systems travel easily over uneven landscapes and, like tunnels configurations, allow the trails to operate at full speed.

There are a number of factors to be taken into account in designing systems, including costs,

performance, urban design, and impacts.

Commissioner Sheffels asked how passengers access light rail systems run at grade in the center of a roadway without having to interact with vehicular traffic. Mr. McGhee said such alignments typically have access platforms near a signalized intersection crosswalk.

Mr. McGhee stressed that no alignments for the East Link system have been designated yet, with the exception of using I-90. A number of alternatives are under review. The East Link project connecting Seattle with downtown Redmond is broken down into five segments labeled A through E. Segment A is the section runs between the International District station in downtown Seattle to south Bellevue using the center roadway of I-90. There will be a station at Rainier Avenue and a stop on Mercer Island close to the Mercer Island park and ride lot. Conversion of the center lane for light rail will not be possible until the HOV lanes are moved to the outer eastbound and westbound lanes.

Commissioner Sheffels asked how steep a grade light rail systems can handle. Mr. McGhee said the maximum grade is six percent, and the I-90 alignment fits within that parameter.

Segment B runs from I-90 to downtown Bellevue and includes three primary alignments, each with different permutations. One alignment runs at-grade in a center lane along Bellevue Way to Main Street, with a station at the South Bellevue park and ride lot. The second alternative follows Bellevue Way as well but veers onto 112th Avenue SE then north to Main Street. The third alignment continues on I-90 further east to access either 118th Avenue SE or the Burlington Northern-Santa Fe right-of-way. The 118th Avenue SE configuration would be elevated along Mercer Slough and at-grade along 118th Avenue SE, with a potential station to the south of SE 8th Street. The Burlington Northern-Santa Fe option would use about 34 feet of the 100-foot right-of-way and approach SE 8th Street with an elevated configuration to a station just south of SE 8th Street. Consideration is being given to creating a new and larger park and ride lot to serve that station; it would be located where Greenbaum Furniture is currently located. The Wilburton park and ride lot will be going away as part of the project to expand I-405. From SE 8th Street, the alignment can run either along 112th Avenue SE or 118th Avenue SE to Main Street; 114th Avenue SE will be going away as part of the I-405 expansion project. Additionally, the system from SE 8th Street could be elevated to a station where the Red Lion hotel is on the corner of Main Street and 112th Avenue SE.

The ultimate alignment of Segment B will determine Segment C, the downtown segment. Downtown Bellevue is the main Eastside market Sound Transit wants to serve. It offers the most potential ridership, but will be challenging for a variety of reasons, primarily the fact that the current rapid growth cycle is removing options on an almost daily basis. Segment C includes three tunnel options, three at-grade options, and two elevated options. One alignment would connect to the at-grade Bellevue Way alignment just south of Main Street then go into a tunnel to access a station just north of Main Street on Bellevue Way; the tunnel would continue north and make a turn eastward onto NE 6th Street where the existing Safeway is located and continue on toward a subway station underneath the Bellevue transit center. The train would come out of the tunnel to the east of 110th Avenue NE in front of Meydenbauer Center and travel up and over I-405 heading east toward Segment D.

The second tunnel option for Segment C would connect to either the 112th Avenue NE or I-405 alignment with a portal at the southwest corner of the intersection of Main Street and 112th Avenue SE. The tunnel would continue to 106th Avenue NE and continue north to NE 6th Street where it would turn toward a subway station underneath the downtown transit center, then use a portal heading eastbound to cross over I-405. The third tunnel option would follow the same

alignment except it would continue on to travel under 108th Avenue NE to a station just before NE 6th Street. Then, instead of making an eastbound turn, the tunnel would continue north under 108th Avenue NE to NE 12th Street where it would come out of the tunnel and travel at-grade on a separate bridge over I-405.

The first of the two elevated alternatives for Segment C would connect to either of the Segment B alignments and run in an elevated configuration along 112th Avenue SE to a station at NE 6th Street, continue to the transit center, then continue north and make an eastbound turn at NE 12th Street and head east over the freeway. The second elevation option would have the same alignment except that just before NE 4th Street it would turn toward the west and come around City Hall to a station between NE 4th Street and NE 6th Street, then head east behind Meydenbauer Center along roughly what would be NE 7th Street to cross over both 112th Avenue NE and I-405 heading east. The Bravern development on the site to the north of Meydenbauer Center may make the alternative almost impossible, unless the elevated alignment were continued north to 112th Avenue NE before heading east.

Mr. McGhee said the two at-grade alternatives for Segment C both run up against the concern of removing capacity from downtown streets. The first alignment would entail a one-way couplet using 110th Avenue NE northbound and 108th Avenue NE southbound. The one-way couplet idea has fewer impacts by reducing the right-of-way needed to accommodate only one set of tracks running in each direction. The vehicle traffic on those streets could run one-way as well in a direction counter to the trains. The second at-grade option would utilize 110th Avenue NE in a double track configuration, possibly continuing north to 112th Avenue NE before heading east.

Answering a question asked by Commissioner Orrico, Mr. McGhee commented that the footprint of the downtown area is quite small and by 2030 will be quite dense with far more residents and employees. The Council has voiced a desire to see more stations in the downtown, primarily in locations where high volumes can be expected. As the downtown builds out, the area around 106th Avenue NE and NE 6th Street will become the geographic center of the area, and that will be taken into consideration as other opportunities for stations are contemplated.

Mr. McGhee said most light rail systems operating in downtowns in the western part of the United States operate at-grade except where it is necessary to cross rivers or other railroad tracks. San Francisco has a tunnel system, as does Seattle. There are no cities in the United States that have modern elevated light rail systems operating in their downtown areas. The system operating in Vancouver, BC is not a true light rail system; it operates on grade-separated rights-of-way and is elevated in some areas, but in the downtown area it operates in a tunnel.

Mr. McGhee said Segment D incorporates the area between downtown Bellevue and the Overlake transit center. The Bel-Red corridor study has considered the possible alignments through that area, and the alternatives reflect that work. I-405 presents a huge barrier; going under the freeway would be prohibitively expensive, so the three options on the table, NE 6th Street, NE 7th Street, and NE 12th Street, involve bridges.

There are three basic corridors traveling through the Bel-Red area: Bel-Red Road, SR-520, and NE 16th Street, which does not presently exist to the west of 130th Avenue NE. As contemplated, the NE 16th Street alignment would include both at-grade and elevated segments and a station between 130th Avenue NE and 132nd Avenue NE. From there it would head up 136th Avenue NE to either the SR-520 corridor, or up 136th Place NE to NE 20th Street, or continue along NE 16th Street to Bel-Red Road. Another option would be to run along NE 12th Street at grade to Bel-Red Road, with a station between 138th Avenue NE and 140th Avenue NE in the vicinity of the Evergreen Shopping Center.

The alignments coming out of the downtown could also use the Burlington Northern-Santa Fe right-of-way connecting with Bel-Red Road, 116th Avenue NE, or SR-520. If light rail is run along the SR-520 corridor, it will be at-grade, which would require a retaining wall and fill material to the level of the outside lane of SR-520. There are no good locations for stations along the SR-520 alignment.

Mr. McGhee said an alignment up NE 16th Street to 136th Avenue NE and on to SR-520 would require a retained cut, or ditch, just after NE 24th Street to get under 148th Avenue NE. The retained cut would come out behind the Safeway on NE 24th Street then turn to travel along 152nd Avenue NE in Redmond. The NE 20th Street alignment would also require a retained cut to the east of 140th Avenue NE to get under 148th Avenue NE and connect to 151st Avenue NE or 152nd Avenue NE to a station to the north of NE 24th Street.

The Bel-Red corridor study steering committee has developed three action alternatives and one no action alternative for study in the EIS. Even under the no action alternative there would be a series of capital improvements included in the CIP, and in any event high-capacity transit will still be going through the area. The study is looking to take advantage of that fact, and Sound Transit is closely following the process.

The city of Redmond is currently working to update its Overlake Neighborhood Plan. They have a number of goals and objectives that include high-capacity transit. An urban center designation for the Overlake area has been approved, and Sound Transit is following that process as well.

Mr. McGhee said Segment E takes the system from the Overlake transit center to downtown Redmond. The alignment envisions a retained cut to slip under NE 40th Street and another retained cut at NE 51st Street, then continuing along SR-520 at-grade into the Sammamish Valley. From that point there are four alternatives under consideration. The first alternative, which is the stated preference of Redmond, is to come off of SR-520 elevated over West Lake Sammamish Parkway and the Sammamish River then return to grade to access a station and park and ride lot on the eastern edge of Marymoor Park near the off ramps from SR-520 to SR-202. From there the route would use the abandoned Burlington Northern-Santa Fe right-of-way running along 76th Street, which fronts Redmond Towne Center, to 161st Street, then north to a terminus at the existing Redmond park and ride lot at 83rd.

Another option would be to cross West Lake Sammamish Parkway and the river in the same way, then run along Bear Creek Parkway to a station on the back side of Redmond Towne Center, then continue at-grade north onto 170th in the center lane, on to Avondale Road, then Union Hill and to the Bear Creek park and ride lot. A third alternative would use the same crossings of West Lake Sammamish Parkway and the river, though more to the west, and aligning with Leary Way, running at-grade to the northwest corner of Redmond Towne Center to the Burlington Northern-Santa Fe right-of-way heading east to a terminus just past SR-520 to a park and ride lot near the off-ramp.

In the fourth alternative, the line would cross over SR-520 and continue south along the ridge to the west side of the river to Redmond Road, then access the Burlington Northern-Santa Fe right-of-way and continue on to the same terminus east of SR-520.

Commissioner Bach asked why all the routes into Redmond need to end. He noted that by combining some of the alternatives it would be easy to create a loop coming in one side, passing through the downtown area and coming out the other side. Mr. McGhee said Sound Transit has not considered that option. He noted that in any event the park and ride lots will need to be

served.

Mr. McGhee informed the Commission that if the system is constructed in its entirety, there will be some 18 miles of track on the Eastside. To meet the ridership demands projected for the future will require several vehicles, and that will require a maintenance base on the Eastside of about 15 to 20 acres. Potential sites are being scouted but no decisions have been made yet.

Chair Mathews asked why the decision was made to go with an overhead power system rather than a third rail. Mr. McGhee explained that third rail systems do not work at-grade; they must be completely grade separated because nothing can cross the hot rail for safety reasons.

Mr. Inghram introduced planner Janet Lewine from the Department of Planning and Community Development. He noted that Ms. Lewine previously worked as a planner for A Regional Coalition for Housing (ARCH). She will be spending time working on housing and neighborhood issues. In addition, she will be tracking the land use and neighborhood issues as they relate to the Sound Transit project.

B. Comprehensive Plan Amendment
– Wilburton/NE 8th Street Study

Mr. Inghram allowed that staff has begun looking internally at the zoning issues involved with the study area. On September 13, the Planning Commission and Transportation Commission met jointly and concluded that one option would be to convert some of the General Commercial zoning to Community Business. If that is done, it will need to be done in a way that will encourage the right type of development potential while making sure the development that results will provide some of the needed street improvements. The Commissions also asked about opportunities to encourage or incent retail auto sales. While it would be more complex, creating a new zone could be a useful tool.

Mr. Inghram said staff intends to come to the next Commission meeting with a clearer picture of what the zoning process should be. That will in many ways inform the base land use policy questions, especially the retail auto sales aspects of auto row.

Mr. Inghram said he had a conversation with Legal Planner Lisa Hutnak about whether or not Costco as a use could be allowed in the Community Business zone. He said the conclusion reached was that it could be, though a formal code interpretation may be needed. He said staff also reviewed the bonus provisions in place for affordable housing that allow for density increases, but allowed that the bonuses have not proved to be an effective tool to date. The Community Business zone has a density limit of 30 dwelling units per acre, and there is some question as to whether or not there needs to be one given the height limits, setbacks and other constraints that apply to the zone. Design review is required in the Community Business zone, and the question for both the Wilburton/NE 8th Street study and the Crossroads Center Plan study is whether or not the existing review requirements should be applied, whether or not the existing codes should be tweaked and be applicable to every Community Business zone in the city, or whether new requirements should be developed specific to the two areas.

Commissioner Sheffels called attention to the fifth paragraph of the overview section of the

Wilburton/NE 8th Street subarea plan and noted that the reference to the new Wilburton Hill Park being under construction should be updated. Mr. Inghram concurred and noted that he will also update the numbers listed earlier in that same paragraph.

Commissioner Sheffels suggested the second project shown in the transportation project additions matrix included on page 13 of the packet should read “NE 5th Street between 120th Avenue NE and 124th Avenue NE.”

Commissioner Orrico suggested the policies as they are written are missing the overall piece of auto row; the issue should be part of the discussion of the subarea plan goals in general. There is also a section in the residential policies that should be moved up into the general discussion area. Mr. Inghram said the part that was in the residential section has been moved into the land use section.

Commissioner Orrico questioned the specific reference to the Galeno property as used in Policy S-WI-7. Mr. Inghram said he will check into that, noting that he had not spent much time reviewing the policies that do not apply to the study area.

Commissioner Bach questioned the effectiveness of the existing affordable housing policies, suggesting that height may not be much of a benefit in building affordable housing. He said the discussion section is quite wordy and could be pared down to read better while saying the same thing. He also suggested the reference to the I-405 business corridor in the overview section should be better defined. Mr. Inghram said the area in question is between the downtown core and the freeway; he allowed that the paragraph could be written more clearly.

Commissioner Robertson agreed that the affordable housing incentives should be revisited when the housing policies are reviewed in 2007, and that they should apply citywide. Elimination of a specific density limit for Community Business should also be considered for application citywide.

Commissioner Robertson called attention to the discussion section for policy S-WI-29 and the reference to “numerous views.” Consideration should be given, at least for the study area, to including a policy calling for development to be designed to the extent possible to provide view corridors to minimize new view obstructions from rights-of-way and neighboring residential properties. Mr. Inghram allowed that policy may have originally been more oriented to preserving access to the territorial views of the watershed. He agreed that it might be appropriate to have two policies, one with that focus and one focusing on views of the downtown, especially if there will be a limited set of design guidelines.

Commissioner Bonincontri said she would prefer to have an umbrella policy but have the specifics in the design guidelines.

Commissioner Robertson suggested the transportation project additions matrix should include a reference to the need for pedestrian and bicycle connections with regard to NE 4th Street. Mr.

