



Project History

Development of an Idea

The Grand Connection was adopted as a City Council Priority to establish a signature urban experience that prioritized non-motorized connectivity and assist in unlocking the development potential of the Wilburton Commercial Area. In December of 2015 Bellevue City Council approved the work plan and Council Principles for the Wilburton – Grand Connection planning initiative. The project included two distinct efforts, which included the visioning process for the Grand Connection, and seizing the opportunity to re-imagine the Wilburton Commercial Area as Bellevue’s next urban neighborhood.

The project was inspired by a number of other initiatives across the country that have sought to strengthen their non-motorized networks while creating a signature urban design experience and corridor. Additionally, defining projects that sought to bridge the divide that urban interstates have created inspired the concept to connect the route across Interstate 405 and beyond Downtown Bellevue.

The concept of the Grand Connection seeks to connect Bellevue’s waterfront, beginning at Meydenbauer Bay, and through its dynamic Downtown, connecting to the Wilburton Commercial Area across Interstate 405, and interfacing with the Eastside Rail Corridor. Much like its peers and precedents, the Grand Connection seeks to connect a number of public, private, and civic assets through a city defining experience while creating and improving opportunities for public space.



▲ Denver Millennium Bridge - Image by Blaine Harrington III



▲ San Antonio Riverwalk - Image by Brandon Watts



▲ Klyde Warren Park - Image by Dallas and Recreation

Existing Conditions

Overview

The route of the Grand Connection weaves through a complex network of public and private land ownership, in addition to a diverse urban fabric over a route of approximately 1.5 miles. Each segment of the route presents unique opportunities, amenities, uses, and character. While the visioning process sought to identify unifying elements, it was important to recognize the differences in each segment and to celebrate them.

The route connects open space, Old Bellevue, Downtown, and important civic assets such as the Bellevue Transit Center, Meydenbauer Convention Center, and Bellevue City Hall. The conditions west of Interstate 405, including Old Bellevue and Downtown, are comprised of existing infrastructure, while the

conditions east of Interstate 405, connecting to the future Eastside Rail Corridor, will be primarily new infrastructure. Changes, as a result of the Grand Connection, would combine updating of existing infrastructure and plans as well as entirely new infrastructure.

In addition to connecting important public and civic functions, the Grand Connection has an opportunity to be an amenity for Bellevue residents and businesses alike. Over 20,000 residents and over 57,000 jobs are within a half mile of the Grand Connection route. Of the 43,000 jobs within a quarter mile of the route over 15 percent are in the creative economy industries. Of over 57,000 employed within a half mile of the route, over 12 percent are employed creative economy industries.



▲ Under Construction Meydenbauer Bay Park Master Plan



▲ Downtown Park Master Plan

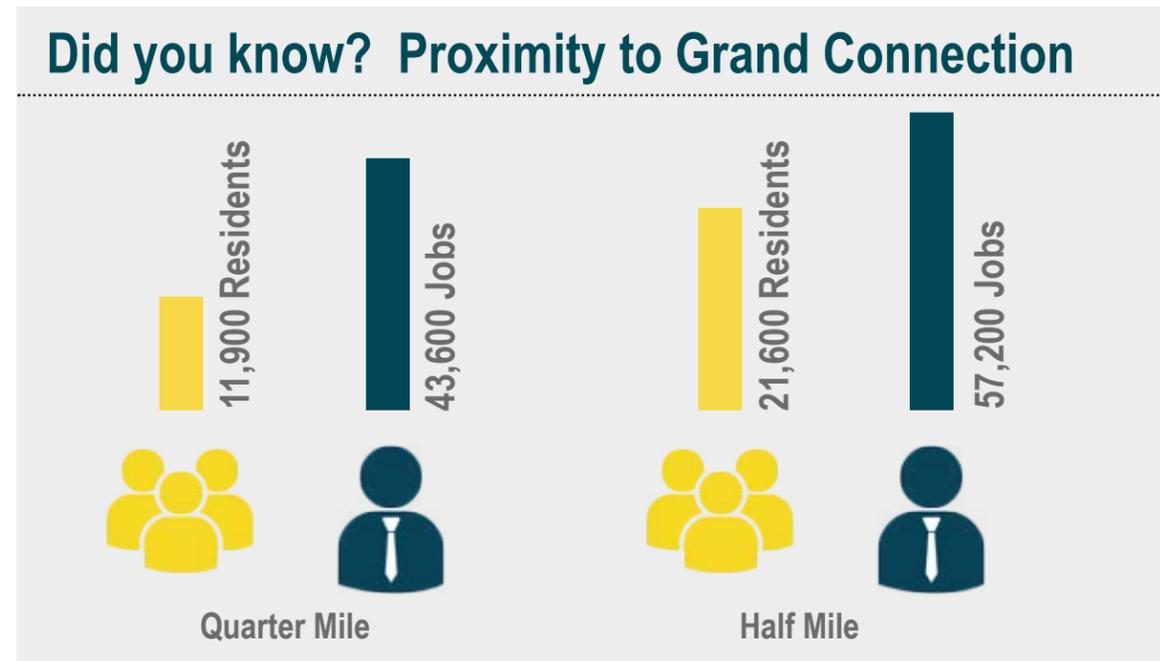
Meydenbauer Bay Park to Downtown Park

Meydenbauer Bay Park serves as the western anchor of the Grand Connection and presents an opportunity to reconnect Bellevue with its waterfront. A plan is currently in place to expand Meydenbauer Bay Park, with a portion of that expansion currently under construction. The plan seeks to significantly expand the park, including new entries, marina, and walking paths. The scope of the Grand Connection Visioning did not include changes to the Meydenbauer Bay Park plan, but does seek to create a seamless connection to the planned improvements of the park, particularly at the intersection of Main Street and 100th Avenue NE.

Old Bellevue, between Meydenbauer Bay Park and the Downtown Park, represents the most intimately scaled area of Downtown Bellevue, including smaller local commercial spaces and residential units. Existing materials speak to an older and more human scaled aesthetic, and a recent increase in density has added to the vibrancy of the community. Traffic volumes,

speed, and the audible impact of traffic are significantly less in Old Bellevue and assist in cultivating a rich and pleasurable pedestrian environment. As such, the Grand Connection Visioning seeks to build upon these successes primarily through urban amenities, identity, cohesive design strategies, and opportunities for art rather than large scale public space improvements. The Downtown Park represents the most significant public space in Downtown Bellevue. It is host to several events throughout the year and is currently undergoing a number of improvements. As part of the Downtown Park Master Plan, the completion of the promenade is currently under construction and is scheduled to be completed in the summer of 2017. This improvement will include a water feature, a formal connection between Old Bellevue and the Downtown Park, terraced seating, an event space, new accessible paths, and the completion of the Inspiration Playground.

With a number of improvements internal to the Downtown Park, the Grand Connection Visioning process focused on elements related to the route, art, and the connections of key periphery locations and



entrances between the park and Downtown Bellevue. These improvements seek to improve the overall experience of park users, as well as its relationship and visibility to surrounding properties and Downtown. This included the lack of entrance at the corner of NE 4th and Bellevue Way, the existing entrance mid block on NE 4th between 100th Avenue NE and Bellevue Way, and the parking lot on the western side of the Downtown Park.

Downtown Park to the Pedestrian Corridor

The segment between the Downtown Park and the Pedestrian Corridor is a part of the grand shopping street of Bellevue Way. Recently, the mixed-use Lincoln Square Expansion development was completed. The development includes new restaurants, retail, hotel, residences, and office space in two new high rises at the northeast corner of Bellevue Way and NE 4th. This development will significantly increase the vitality of this major intersection, and segment of the Grand Connection by introducing additional retail, restaurant, and entertainment functions. Anchoring the northwest corner of Lincoln Square Expansion is Bellevue Arts Museum, serving as the art and cultural hub of Bellevue.

To the west is the super regional mall of Bellevue Square serving as a primary destination and anchor to the western portion of Downtown Bellevue. At this intersection modest public spaces exist at the gateway to the Pedestrian Corridor of NE 6th Street. These spaces include the entry to Bellevue Square and Bellevue Arts Museum, as well as those along NE 6th Street, east of Bellevue Way.

Bellevue Way has been enhanced with planted medians and special paving at its intersection with NE 6th Street. This has been successful in improving the quality, comfort, and overall experience of crossing this intersection while creating a gateway effect and appearance to both Bellevue Square and the Pedestrian Corridor.

Pedestrian Corridor

As part of the 1981 Land Use Code adoption, the city defined the Pedestrian Corridor as an important element to the growth and quality of Downtown’s pedestrian environment.

The original guidelines for the Pedestrian Corridor sought to create a safe, comfortable, lively, and attractive place for pedestrians. The goal of the Grand Connection is to build upon the principles of the Pedestrian Corridor and unify it as a single vision for the entire route. The original set of guidelines established a series of identities along the route, including “Street as Plaza” (Bellevue Way to 106th Avenue NE), the “Garden Hill Climb” (106th Avenue NE to 108th Avenue NE) and “Transit Central” (108th Avenue NE to 110th Avenue NE).

Several significant developments and public spaces exist today on the Pedestrian Corridor including Bellevue Arts Museum, Lincoln Square, Lincoln Square Expansion, Compass Plaza, and City Center Plaza.

Compass Plaza serves as the geographic center of Downtown Bellevue and one of the largest public spaces in Downtown. Its current configuration consists of a series of terraced spaces in order to accommodate for an accessible path of travel through the change



▲ Restaurant Kiosk at Compass Plaza

in topography. The plaza has a number of movable chairs and tables for outdoor seating in support of a restaurant kiosk. The plaza is also one of the sites of Bellevue Downtown Association’s Live at Lunch concert series.

Moving east is the Garden Hill Climb and former “Cattle Chute”, a narrow pedestrian path that was recently improved by widening and the addition of decorative lighting and handrail. Directly north of the Cattle Chute is the terraced outdoor and vegetated spaces of the Garden Hill Climb. Upon redevelopment of the properties to the south, the segment would be widened to the full 60’ width of the Pedestrian Corridor.

To the east, across 108th Avenue NE, is the Bellevue Transit Center. This bus-only facility is a key entry point and gateway for those employed and visiting Bellevue, a number of express bus routes from other regional cities provide direct access to Downtown Bellevue. The Transit Center is an island with two bus lanes to the north and south.



▲ Wilburton Commercial Area Looking Southwest - Image courtesy of City of Bellevue

South of the Transit Center is City Center Plaza. It is an important open space in Downtown, and provides opportunities for informal gathering, seating, and programming. City Center Plaza is another location for Bellevue Downtown Association’s Live at Lunch events.

Continuing east is Bellevue City Hall and the future Downtown East Link light rail station. Directly north of the station, across NE 6th Street, is Meydenbauer Convention Center and the high end retail shopping destination of the Bravern. The existing City Hall Plaza will be replaced with a new hardscaped plaza upon completion of the East Link light rail station.

Interstate 405 & the Wilburton Commercial Area

Wilburton Commercial Area

Historically referred to as “Auto Row” the Wilburton Commercial Area straddles the 116th Avenue NE corridor between SE 5th Street and NE 12th Street. Land uses are commercial in nature, and the intensity

of use is low. The opportunity for this area as a more urban neighborhood is created through local and regional investments in a number of planned transportation infrastructure improvements. By 2023 the Wilburton East Link light rail station will provide service at the northern end of the study area. Additionally the East Main, Downtown, Wilburton, and Spring District stations will ensure that the entire study area will be within a transit walkshed. As a complement to the enhanced transit service, the Eastside Rail Corridor will provide a non-motorized north-south spine through the entire study area and connecting to regional destinations and facilities such as the I-90 Trail/Mountains to Sound Greenway and the SR 520 Trail. The Grand Connection is anticipated to interface with the Eastside Rail Corridor and provide an east-west connection to Downtown.

Combined with the planned transportation improvements, the Wilburton Commercial Area is positioned between two high growth urban areas in Bellevue - Downtown and BelRed. This advantageous context plus exceptional mobility access create the opportunity for the Wilburton Commercial Area to become a new urban neighborhood. To explore opportunities and to capitalize on this unique context, the City has launched a land use, urban design, transportation, and environmental analysis of the study area. This process is intended to create the new vision that will include analysis and recommendations to zoning, urban design, transportation, and open space. The analysis is expected to be completed in the first quarter of 2018. The Interstate 405 crossing alternatives, part of the Grand Connection visioning, will be assessed through the Wilburton Commercial Area Environmental Impact Statement (EIS) process to assist in selecting a preferred alternative.

The City owns the centrally located parcel known as Lincoln Center. It is located between I-405 and 116th Avenue NE and was the previous home of Impact Hub Bellevue, an entrepreneur and startup facility. Sound Transit will control the northern portion of the site with East Link's aerial guide-way passing through this segment. This property is expected to be the most likely receiver of a leg of the Grand Connection that would seek to connect with 116th Avenue NE.

Interstate 405

Interstate 405 represents a large divide between Downtown Bellevue and the Wilburton Commercial Area. It is an eight lane interstate with two HOV lanes at the center. The HOV lanes, which provide direct access to NE 6th Street create ramps between NE 6th Street and NE 4th Street. This area is seen as the most likely area where the Grand Connection could span, crossing into the Wilburton Commercial Area. In addition to the center HOV ramps and lanes there are on and off ramps for NE 4th Street that also create a challenge in navigating and crossing.

There is currently consideration for extending the NE 6th Street HOV lanes into the Wilburton Commercial Area. This extension would include only 2 lanes and the extension would connect to either 116th Avenue NE or 120th Avenue NE.



▲ Interstate 405, NE 4th Street, & NE 6th Street HOV

East Link Light Rail

Just south of NE 6th Street will be the aerial guide-way for the East Link light rail. The guide-way emerges from the Downtown tunnel and Downtown station and remains south of NE 6th crossing into the Wilburton Commercial Area. As it moves east towards the Eastside Rail Corridor, it turns north onto the Eastside Rail Corridor with a station on the north side of NE 8th Street. It remains an aerial guide-way for this entire segment. East Link is expected to begin revenue operations in 2023 and will provide enhanced high capacity regional transit connections in and around the Wilburton Commercial Area.

Eastside Rail Corridor

The Eastside Rail Corridor is envisioned as a multi-use mobility, utility, and recreational corridor that will serve as a regional asset. A future non-motorized trail that will connect Woodinville to Renton. The segment through the Wilburton Commercial Area is expected to be the most heavily used segment, and represents one of the few urban locations for the trail.

As the spine of the Wilburton Commercial Area, it holds tremendous potential to transform the study area, and to also create new connections to Downtown with its Grand Connection interface. The project, often discussed as a regional version of the Atlanta BeltLine, will assist in unlocking the future potential of the Wilburton Commercial Area. Both the Grand Connection and the Eastside Rail Corridor are heavily influenced by one another, and the visioning work to date has been executed with a strong collaboration with those responsible for planning the Eastside Rail Corridor; King County. The trail is set to be completed in 2023.



▲ Eastside Rail Corridor Route from Woodinville to Renton - Image courtesy of King County



Charrette with Bellevue Arts Museum

In April of 2016 the City of Bellevue and Bellevue Arts Museum partnered to host the *Grand Connection Visioning Charrette*. The charrette capitalized on Bellevue Arts museum's landmark exhibition *Louis Kahn: The Power of Architecture*. As one of only three North American cities to host the exhibit, it served as a unique and landmark opportunity to highlight the transformational potential of design.

The exhibition encompassed an unprecedented and diverse range of architectural models, original drawings, photographs, and films. All of Kahn's important projects were extensively documented - from his early urban planning concepts and single-family houses to monumental late works such as the Roosevelt Memorial in New York City, posthumously completed in October 2012.

Louis Kahn believed the city to be a laboratory. It is through this lens that the City and Museum collaborated to create an event that celebrated design, transformation, and Bellevue as an urban laboratory.

The charrette was a three day event that included over 70 architects, artists, engineers, planners, and urban designers. They were tasked with developing concepts and ideas for the Grand Connection. At the time of the charrette the City possessed very few graphic materials to exhibit the potential of the Grand Connection. The results of the charrette served an important role in helping to visualize concepts and intents, and also planting some of the early seeds of design that would be explored in the visioning process. It provided tangible ideas that the public could respond to, and understand the vision of the project despite being many months away from exhibiting visioning concepts. The charrette also worked to develop early support and constructive feedback from stakeholders and the public to assist in crafting a vision that would

be embraced by the business community and residents alike.

Participants in the charrette were separated into eight teams and were given two assignments. Recognizing the diverse set of challenges that embody the Grand Connection, the assignments reflected the small and large scale challenges that exist. The first assignment separated the route between Meydenbauer Bay and the Meydenbauer Convention Center, into four distinct segments. Each team was asked to develop an identity, cohesive design strategies, and propose public space improvements for their segment of the route.

The second assignment was to consider the new infrastructure that would cross Interstate 405 and interface with the Wilburton Commercial Area and the Eastside Rail Corridor. This assignment considered how to create a connection and place across the interstate and how the non-motorized connections of the Eastside Rail Corridor and Grand Connection would intersect.

Over 70 architects, artists, engineers, planners, and urban designers developed concepts and visions for the Grand Connection.

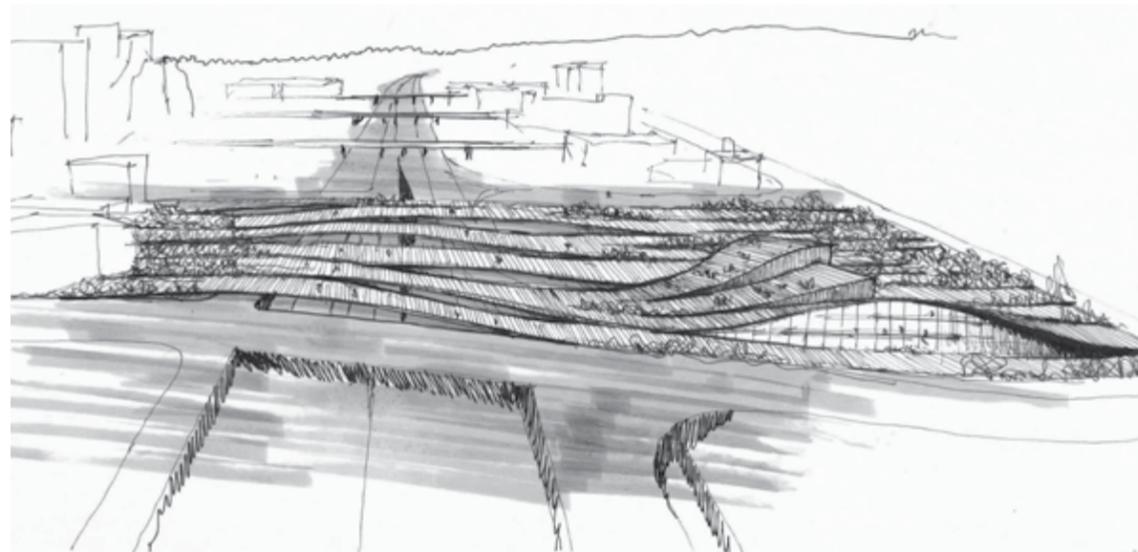
The charrette produced a range of results that pushed the boundaries of what was thought to be possible and re-imagined connectivity and Downtown Bellevue. These ideas provided an opportunity for local input and regional sensitivity to the project while also beginning a dialogue around areas that were previously not considered as part of the project.

The charrette concluded with a public open house that allowed participants to exhibit their work and present to the public and stakeholders. Charles Montgomery, author of the book *Happy City: Transforming Our Lives Through Urban Design*, provided an inspiring speech on the benefits of improving non-motorized connectivity and creating a sense of place and pride in the City of Bellevue.

Following the open house a positive dialogue continued with the public and stakeholders. The charrette exhibited the creative nature of the project through a dynamic, flexible, and inspiring visioning process. Stakeholders and the public continued to provide opportunities for collaboration and

constructive ideas that would assist in crafting a vision that earned the buy in and support from the community.

The charrette was an integral moment in the Grand Connection visioning process, providing some of the first illustrative ideas of the project, the production of a book highlighting the ideas developed during the charrette, and the launching of a project specific website. The energy and passion of the charrette participants set the tone of excitement and new ideas for the future of the project. Their ideas and concepts continue to influence future recommendations for the project and the charrette continues to serve as a significant reference point for the project.



▲ Interstate 405 Crossing Concept from the Grand Connection Visioning Charrette - Drawing by Omar Al Hassawi - Washington State University

