



The Changing Face of Bellevue

Anyone who has visited Bellevue over the past few years has seen a lot of change. More high rises. Lively arts scene and downtown restaurants. Quality fashion clothiers. More international diversity on a percentage basis than any other city in King County, most of it Asian. The growth that people see is largely by plan, not entirely by accident and good fortune.

The Pacific Northwest is a small region by world standards. But there are tons of growth opportunities, and the region and state have thrived on exports of technology, services, and expertise. In the coming years, we feel we can be optimistic about this region and Bellevue's place in it. The challenge is where to strategically focus our efforts more than how to generate that growth.

Economic development and the work to generate it can be hard to understand. It is not something strictly operations oriented, like most city hall functions. It consists more of interfacing with businesses and strategic planning. In fact, as Bellevue sees it, our strategic mission is to "fill spaces with successful businesses." That has two primary components – (a) making connections that attract and keep businesses, supported in proper ways by the infrastructure and services of the city and (b) helping businesses be successful, from providing economic information, to direct small business assistance, to making connections that generate business and development deals. There is not one equation for how best to do this. For example, it is a balance of keeping taxes low but providing the services and infrastructure that people need. That balance is based on understanding how businesses work, both locally and globally, the many different types of businesses, city finances and citizen preferences. It is also based on today's needs as well as future needs.

Our preferred approach is collaborative. We want to be competitive globally. In part, that means knowing how to work together and not cannibalize each other's business base.

Questions:

1. Why is an Economic Development program important for a city like Bellevue?

It is important to have this interface with businesses, to understand and anticipate their needs, help them solve problems whether that is with city services or some other sphere, and to provide expertise and ideas that will help generate new opportunities. Essentially, it is strategy and vision. Without it, the city responds passively to the winds of change. With it, the city and its people might more successfully work together for the kind of economy, community, and amenities they want.

2. What are some of the more traditional roles of such programs for cities like Bellevue?

Historically, most cities stick to basic fundamentals. For example, handling complaints and requests for information from businesses, or having someone act as a single point of contact for major corporations. This can be either recruitment or retention oriented. Other things done by most cities are to lobby for state incentives and seek federal grants. In large, poverty stricken cities, state and federal aid can be the largest part of their activities. Other large cities – Chicago, for instance – are great at being strategic and sophisticated on a global basis. They look beyond the traditional roles, to reshape their city and help more businesses be successful regardless of their size. That's how they regenerate neighborhoods and also fill skyscrapers.

In Bellevue, we try to think regionally and globally. In that sense, we borrow from the playbook of large cities like Chicago. The nature of our region's economy, the wealth of international diversity and growth

opportunities, and Bellevue's central location lead us to think on a scale that goes beyond what is expected of a smaller size city. Some examples of what Bellevue is doing differently include: (a) small business programs, (b) culture, arts, and fashion efforts, (c) the Bellevue Economic Partnership (Chamber, Meydenbauer, Downtown Association, and City all working together to market the city), and (d) international programs.

3. Does an economic development become more important in times of an economic down turn?

If so, why?

Economic Development is often a long-term effort. Some services are provided every day, but the bigger efforts, new buildings and measurable growth can take 5 years, 10 years or longer to see. For example, Bellevue's downtown has shown remarkable growth in the last decade, but the basic vision and plan for this was created in the early 1980s. During an economic downturn, it is important to maintain commitment to long-term efforts. It sometimes becomes even more important, because the economy, like today, is rapidly restructuring and business needs are changing. Understanding and adjusting to that, and then being a catalyst for new growth, requires real effort and sophisticated strategy.

4. What have been Bellevue's most important economic development program efforts in recent years?

In Bellevue, we are excited about what we have undertaken and accomplished in recent years. The Bravern development which includes Neiman Marcus is one example. The relocation of Symmetra, Expedia, and Microsoft employees to downtown is another example. To help small businesses, we co-created the Bellevue Entrepreneurship Center and tackled the redevelopment of neighborhood commercial centers. We have hosted business workshops at city hall on a wide variety of subjects from taxation to the needs of digital media companies, from small business problems to international business opportunities. Through this, we have helped new businesses start and grow, and we have assisted large corporations, including Key Bank, Microsoft, Boeing, and PACCAR, to gain a stronger voice in federal policy and gain access to both domestic and foreign government leaders. Recruitment efforts have been numerous and successful. International high profile efforts have included the Indian Consulate, our Dalian Trade Agreement, and a Mexican business accelerator called TechBA.

5. Where do you envision the program going in the next several years—what will be its emphasis?

A number of seeds have been planted for the future. In the next several years, we hope to deepen and expand our activities. Our hope is to generate significant achievements that Bellevue citizens can be proud of and that enhance Bellevue's image and central place in this region. Locally, we hope to finish redevelopment efforts at three key neighborhood centers, keep downtown vibrant and growing, feed the growth of the hotel and convention business, maintain Bellevue's place as the culture and retail center of the Eastside, and help the growth in the Bel-Red Corridor as that plan takes off. Bellevue has also just begun a planning effort to review the needs for the I-90 corridor. Regionally, we will continue to integrate our strategy with state and regional partners and neighboring cities. Internationally, our China and India efforts will move toward generating specific partnerships and business deals, attracting foreign investment to Bellevue, expanding our efforts to include the emerging opportunities in Southeast Asia and other places, sustaining Sister Cities programs, and creating cultural opportunities for our internationally diverse residents. Some of these include an India Day Festival at Crossroads and possible international fashion shows from South Asia, China, and Japan. It also makes business sense – it helps our businesses retain intellectual talent, feeds the energy and ideas of entrepreneurs, builds an understanding of international cultures which is so vitally important to doing business globally, supports retail malls, and attracts investment.

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Websites

City of Bellevue: www.bellevuewa.gov
Bellevue Chamber of Commerce: www.bellevuechamber.org
Bellevue Downtown Association: www.bellevuedowntown.org