

REDMOND 2050 OVERLAKE SMALL BUSINESS

ROUNDTABLE DISCUSSIONS

Discussion Summary (preliminary draft, updated February 22, 2021)

Discussion Purpose and Objectives

Background

The City is conducting its periodic update of the Redmond Comprehensive Plan—Redmond 2050. The Comprehensive Plan—which is legally required of every city and county in Washington—is the guiding document for how Redmond should plan and build for the next few decades. Planning for growth helps to build a city that meets the needs of the community. Redmond 2050 builds on the progress our city has made and—with public input—will guide our city’s growth.

The first tasks of Redmond 2050 include a community visioning process about where and how we should concentrate expected population and job growth. In fall 2020, the City hosted an online community workshop and multiple online interactive activities to gather input from Redmond community members and other stakeholders that will inform the vision.

The City has been tracking the demographics of participants in these activities and has observed that there are some gaps in participation among some key stakeholders, including small and Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC)-owned businesses. Recognizing that different stakeholder groups have different engagement needs, the City is hosting small business discussion groups to ensure that we capture input from small and BIPOC-owned businesses.

Goals and Objectives

Our goal for this focus group is to gather input from small business owners—particularly those who identify as BIPOC—to inform decisions about where to locate future job and population growth in Redmond. Specific objectives include:

- 1) Understand what housing and employment densities and commercial space sizes and configurations small businesses in Overlake need to survive and thrive.
- 2) Understand how redevelopment could benefit or adversely impact existing small businesses.
- 3) Gather input on whether the City should consider developing Overlake into an international district, similar to Crossroads, the Rainier Valley, or the Tukwila Global Food Hall.
- 4) Address current gaps in outreach for Redmond 2050.
- 5) Confirm the best strategies and tactics for engaging with small businesses moving forward.

Discussion Format

Due to the COVID-19 pandemic and restrictions, these discussions were virtual events.

For the Overlake small business roundtable discussion, we reached out to 16 small business in the Overlake neighborhood with emails and follow-up phone calls. We sought a mix of retail, restaurant, and professional services, and prioritized small businesses that appeared to be BIPOC-owned and/or operated. Recognizing that the time and input of small business leaders are valuable and limited, we compensated individuals who participated by offering each of them with a \$75 Visa gift card upon completion of the roundtable discussion. The roundtable discussion took place on Tuesday, February 2 from 1:30 pm to 3:00 pm. Six small businesses confirmed attendance and three showed up.

In addition, we participated in a discussion group facilitated by Eastside for All. The Enterprise Welcoming Group convenes BIPOC community leaders who support BIPOC-owned small businesses. They offered us time on their monthly agenda to gather their input. Since most of the members of this group support BIPOC-owned small businesses from all over the eastside—not just Redmond or the Overlake area—we sought their general perspective on what small businesses need to survive and thrive, as well as how redevelopment could help or harm BIPOC-owned small businesses.

Who Participated?

The following businesses participated in the February 2 roundtable discussion:

- Eastside Little Learners/Spectrum Academy (Jiejun Julie Ellington, Owner)
- Firaash Furniture (Ishmael ____, Manager)
- MAQ Software (Maria Walker, Human Resources)

Unfortunately, due to audio problems, it was difficult to hear Julie's responses so we followed up with a 1:1 meeting to capture her input.

The following community leaders participated in the February 17 Enterprise Welcoming Group discussion:

- Mohamed Bakr, Director, Muslim Community and Neighborhood Association
- Audrey Barbakoff, Community Engagement and Economic Development Manager, King County Library System
- Jo Anderson Cavinta, Diversity Services Coordinator, King County Library System
- Fabienne Mouton, Associate Director of Corporate Outreach and Career Center, Bellevue College Center for Career Connections
- Gitanjali Rawat, Program Director, Upwardly Global
- José Vasquez, Director of Programs, Ventures Nonprofit
- Brian Vaughn, Private Wealth Advisor, Silverhawk Financial

Discussion Group Outcomes and Key Themes

We asked small business roundtable and Eastside for All participants to imagine that it is 2050 and Redmond has grown in population and jobs. Considering their business, we asked participants to share their aspirations for and concerns about the future in Redmond. The following sub-sections describe what we heard from them:

Aspirations for and Concerns about the Future

Redevelopment and New Opportunities

Participants in the small business roundtable generally appreciated the current and planned redevelopment in Overlake. They liked the mixed-use development (apartment and retail space) and the opportunities that come with it, including new foot traffic and future access to light rail. For retail businesses that rely on foot traffic past their windows to generate new business—like the furniture store that participated in our discussion group—the redevelopment seems like a welcome opportunity. They would like to grow and become a staple of the community. They are excited to see light rail come in and **aspire to see the area continue to redevelop**.

The furniture store builds furniture for smaller spaces and hope that the increased density and multi-family housing fuels their own growth. That said, they shared that one important lesson learned from the pandemic is that density and multi-family housing has its risks, and we may need to **devise new ways to build communities**. They hope there are some innovations that can be harnessed to balance the need for housing with other needs, such as public health.

Walkability

Continuing with the theme of walkability, participants in the small business roundtable indicated that the Overlake neighborhood is not pedestrian friendly. They aspire to a more walkable neighborhood, but for different reasons.

One participant in the small business roundtable indicated that their employees—especially entry-level employees who do not have cars—tend to live in apartments within walking distance of the office. Being able to walk in a safe, convenient, and pedestrian-friendly environment is important.

Another participant in the small business roundtable talked about the importance of foot traffic past their display windows for generating new business, adding that emphasizing walkability over car travel would improve air quality. They **aspire to see the area improve walkability**.

Some participants in the Eastside for All discussion echoed this aspiration, expressing hope that **a future Redmond will have walkable areas that constrain where cars can go** and retain a neighborhood feel.

Traffic

There was general agreement that redevelopment—especially if it involves adding a lot more housing to the area—needs to be accompanied by traffic mitigation efforts. Participants in the small business roundtable shared that the pre-pandemic traffic in Overlake was terrible. One participant in the small business roundtable indicated that even when the Overlake light rail station opens, some employees will drive to work and they anticipate continuing to need parking. They would like to see **changes to the traffic management and other strategies to mitigate for traffic congestion.**

Eastside for All discussion participants generally echoed this concern, adding that there **needs to be better access to transit, especially the regional high-capacity transit system.** One discussion participant cited Portland, Oregon as an example of how the focus on moving people, rather than cars has led to much better transit access for residents.

Diversity and Community

One small business roundtable participant celebrated Redmond's diversity, adding that diversity brings out the best in people and opens them up to things they may not be inclined to do on their own. They said they hope for a future where **Redmond's diversity sustains and grows.**

At least one participant in the Eastside for All discussion echoed this aspiration, adding that they would love to see Redmond commit to supporting diverse small businesses by **encouraging development of physical spaces that are attractive to small and BIPOC-owned businesses.** Such spaces would not be cookie cutter designs; rather, they would harness approaches such as the cooperative or bazaar model and special events to celebrate and encourage a vibrant and diverse small business community.

A small business roundtable participant raised a question of whether Redmond has a plan to diversify its jobs away from so much reliance on the tech industry, where the relatively high wages tend to drive up costs. They indicated that while their own businesses depend on the strong tech industry in Redmond, they would like to **see more balance across industries.** A participant in the Eastside for All discussion built on this theme, expressing hope that **better communication, information in multiple languages, and engagement through trusted messengers** would improve access for BIPOC-owned businesses to necessities such as loans and business licenses.

One small business roundtable participant wondered if Redmond's growth would continue to focus on housing and amenities for young, single people rather than families. They would like to see **more balanced growth that includes housing and amenities aimed at families.**

Affordability

Participants in the small business roundtable expressed **concern about Redmond becoming increasingly less affordable,** particularly with respect to housing. One participant in the small business roundtable explained that they tend to hire recent graduates who get sticker shock

when they see the rental prices in Redmond. Another small business roundtable participant indicated that while it is not a problem for recruiting and retention of talent now, the lack of affordable housing could be problematic in the future.

At least one participant in the Eastside for All discussion repeated the concern about unaffordability, focusing specifically on the lack of affordable retail and other commercial spaces along the eastside. They shared that they observe small business owners putting all of their resources into building a successful business, only to be displaced when the cost to rent space becomes too high to afford. They expressed fear that small and BIPOC-owned businesses would be displaced from Redmond and other eastside communities in the future. Eastside for All discussion participants shared a number of ideas for how lack of affordability could be conquered in a future Redmond, including **legalizing more home-based businesses**—similar to an approach being taken in California—and **encouraging incubator spaces, pop-up villages, food truck areas, and other innovative commercial ventures**.

Parks and Green Space

One small business roundtable participant shared that they value Redmond's green spaces and parks and fear that too much growth and development could result in loss of open space and community gathering places. They would like a future Redmond to **sustain and expand its parks and open spaces**.

Technology access

At least three participants in the Eastside for All discussion raised concerns about BIPOC community members and BIPOC-owned small businesses being left behind when it comes to technology access. They shared that the eastside's relative position as a very tech-oriented region may be masking some significant gaps in both access to and literacy in emerging technology. They aspired to a Redmond where **barriers to access to technology and digital literacy are eliminated**.

Benefits and Impacts of Growth Scenarios

The next set of questions asked roundtable discussion participants to consider the two potential scenarios for accommodating future growth in Redmond and provide their feedback on how these scenarios may benefit or impact their business. (Due to limited time, we did not ask this question of Eastside for All discussion participants.) Participants did not draw strong conclusions as to which scenario would be preferable for their business, but **based on the feedback they offered, the concentrated growth scenario may better facilitate their priorities**. The following summarizes their feedback:

- Participants would prefer the growth scenario that best facilitates getting around without a car, musing that the access to light rail and locating of housing close to jobs and services would be beneficial. This suggests the concentrated growth scenario would be preferable.

- Two participants would like to see a growth scenario that brings more people to live in Overlake, which would help to attract more business. Again, this points to the increased density a concentrated growth scenario would provide.

In addition, two participants indicated they would prefer **the growth scenario that facilitates more walkability in Overlake**, emphasizing this is important for employees, attracting new customers, and creating a virtuous cycle where the improve air quality that comes with more walking in turn makes walking more desirable.

What Small Businesses Need to Stay in Redmond

We shared that redevelopment in Overlake is going to continue, changing buildings and streets, and asked participants to tell us what they would need to keep their business in Redmond.

- Accessibility to the new light rail stations for employees and customers
- Family-friendly environment that draws families to the area
- Walkability, including better sidewalks, lighting, and safety; and better wayfinding.
- Affordable and accessible places for employees to live
- An easy commute
- More availability of affordable, quality child care
- Space to expand in the future; in the case of the child care provider, this would require specialized space to meet the complex local and state requirements for child care facilities

We asked Eastside for All discussion participants a similar question about what small and BIPOC-owned businesses may need to survive and thrive during redevelopment. They echoed the call for more walkability in commercial districts. They added that small and BIPOC-owned businesses need to be engaged in decision and design processes, suggesting that **an outreach liaison—similar to how Redmond staffs its human services team—would be helpful**. This outreach liaison could also help small businesses access loans and grants to help them get through redevelopment and avoid displacement.

We asked small business roundtable discussion participants about their future parking needs after the light rail station opens. All three participants indicated they expect to need about the same or more parking.

We also asked small business roundtable participants to share with us what makes them stay in Redmond now.

- A common reason is the presence of Microsoft. Microsoft is a major partner for the software consulting firm. For the furniture store and child care provider, Microsoft employees are key customers.
- For all participants, owners, managers, and other employees within their companies are local. Two participants indicated that the owners and management at their respective

businesses live in Redmond have a vested interest in this community. In both businesses, the leadership are committed to the local area.

- All participants indicated that Redmond's family-friendliness and schools are reasons to stay and invest in Redmond.
- Participants added that proximity to future light rail was also a driver.

Overlake as a Destination

We asked small business roundtable participants to share their feedback on an idea: One of the unique characteristics of the Overlake neighborhood is the variety of cuisines from all over the globe. Across the region, in neighborhoods like Bellevue's Crossroads, Seattle's Rainier Valley, and Global Food Hall in Tukwila, local governments have partnered with neighborhoods to develop and sustain its international character and make it a place that draws visitors from outside the area. Participants expressed support for this idea, for multiple reasons. All three participants liked that it would add more food options for employees, which would be appreciated. One participant liked that it would give people from outside the area another reason to visit. They also felt that such an approach could help open people up to new experiences and cuisines, which would enhance Redmond's diversity, equity, and inclusion.

How Best to Engage with Small Businesses

We asked small business roundtable and Eastside for All discussion participants how best to engage them and their fellow business owners in future conversations. Small business roundtable participants liked the roundtable discussion format, but suggested that we share the discussion questions in advance so they can better prepare their feedback.

Participants in the Eastside for All discussion encouraged Redmond to consider an outreach liaison to Redmond small businesses, similar to how Redmond staffs its human services department. They indicated that building and sustaining relationships is far preferable to once-off engagement. They also suggested that Redmond compensate people for providing their feedback.

Other Questions, Comments, and Feedback

We asked participants to share any additional questions or concerns:

- How do we incentive and sustain small businesses and job diversity in the area? Caroline Chapman, Senior Planner with the City of Redmond, who listened to the discussion responded that this is top of mind, as Redmond has one of the highest jobs to housing ratio in the county. something that the City is working on.
- What is the plan to protect Redmond's green spaces and parks? Caroline Chapman responded that Redmond is hearing from all its outreach that parks and open space are priorities for people and the reason many move to Redmond in the first place. As such, they will be planning for how to sustain these spaces and places.
- What are we doing to ensure that Redmond continues to be a good place for families? Caroline Chapman responded that this is going to be a balancing act between creating

enough housing for the younger, single people we expect to move here for jobs while at the same time expanding the availability of family and multi-generational housing.

- What is Redmond’s plan for ensuring that its schools will be able to keep up with the population growth? Caroline Chapman responded that for all new developments there are impact fees to maintain the schools serving those developments. We agreed to do a little more digging for answers to that question and share with the group.
- Considering climate change, what is Redmond doing to encourage innovation in how buildings and communities are constructed and operated in a more sustainable and eco-friendly way? Caroline Chapman shared that sustainability and climate resilience is a key theme of this comprehensive plan. The City also has a sustainability plan that includes codes and other policies to encourage sustainable development. We try to keep these policies and incentives flexible so they can adapt as new innovations emerge.

Takeaways

We formed some key takeaways based on the feedback from participants:

- Participants generally see redevelopment and density in Overlake as a benefit, rather than a threat. Note that there were no restaurants or other small retail businesses with tight margins that participated in the discussion. It is possible that the businesses that participated are less vulnerable to potential displacement than those that did not. Engaging small businesses in Overlake that may be operating closer to the margins of solvency remains a gap in our outreach for Redmond 2050.
- Any growth in Overlake would need to be accompanied by traffic mitigation and measures to improve walkability and pedestrian safety. This would help Overlake businesses concerned about recruiting and retention and those seeking to attract new customers.
- Affordability—a theme we’ve heard throughout our public and stakeholder engagement—is also a concern for the people who participated in these discussion groups. They would like to see a balanced approach to creating new housing that addresses the needs of families as well as young, single people. They would also like to see measures taken to counter the impacts of rising commercial rents on small and BIPOC-owned businesses.
- Creating a dining destination in Overlake that celebrates its many cultures and cuisines is an idea that may gain some traction among Overlake businesses. Although we did not explicitly float this idea with the Eastside for All discussion participants, a lot of their feedback pointed to similar approaches as a positive way to support small and BIPOC-owned businesses.
- Redmond could help small and BIPOC-owned businesses survive and thrive during redevelopment by creating a small business liaison who could build and sustain relationships with small, BIPOC-, and immigrant-owned businesses. This role would help businesses engage in participatory design and decision-making processes to ensure that redevelopment incorporates their needs, and assist businesses in accessing loans and other tools to help them stay in business.

Next Steps

We will use the feedback shared with us at these discussions—along with feedback from the November 2020 Community Workshop, recent interviews with community-based organizations, and recent online interactive engagement tools to finish developing the growth alternatives.

Once the City of Redmond has landed on a growth scenario, we will continue gathering input on what that growth should look like. We may reach out to the businesses who participated in these discussions again, to report back on how their input was considered and addressed in decisions about growth scenarios and gather input on the form that future growth should take.

Appendix

1. Moderator Guide
2. Questions for Enterprise Welcoming Group