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FEATURED

'This Will Be Sammamish's Downtown That It Never Had': Work Underway for Long-Awaited Town Center

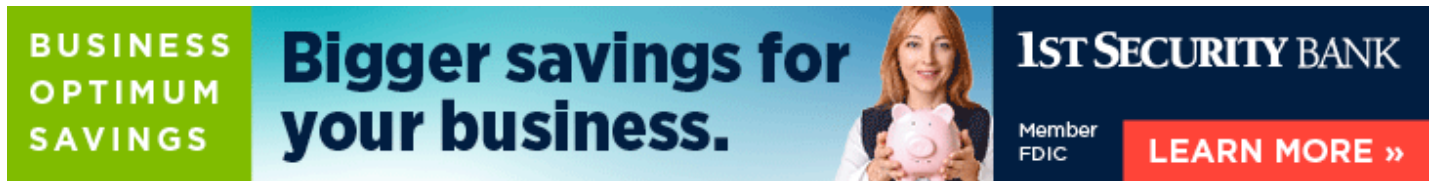
John Stearns

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This conceptual rendering shows multifamily housing above retail, one of the project elements comprising Sammamish Town Center. The street on the left that parallels the property is 224th Avenue Southeast.

Urbal Architecture

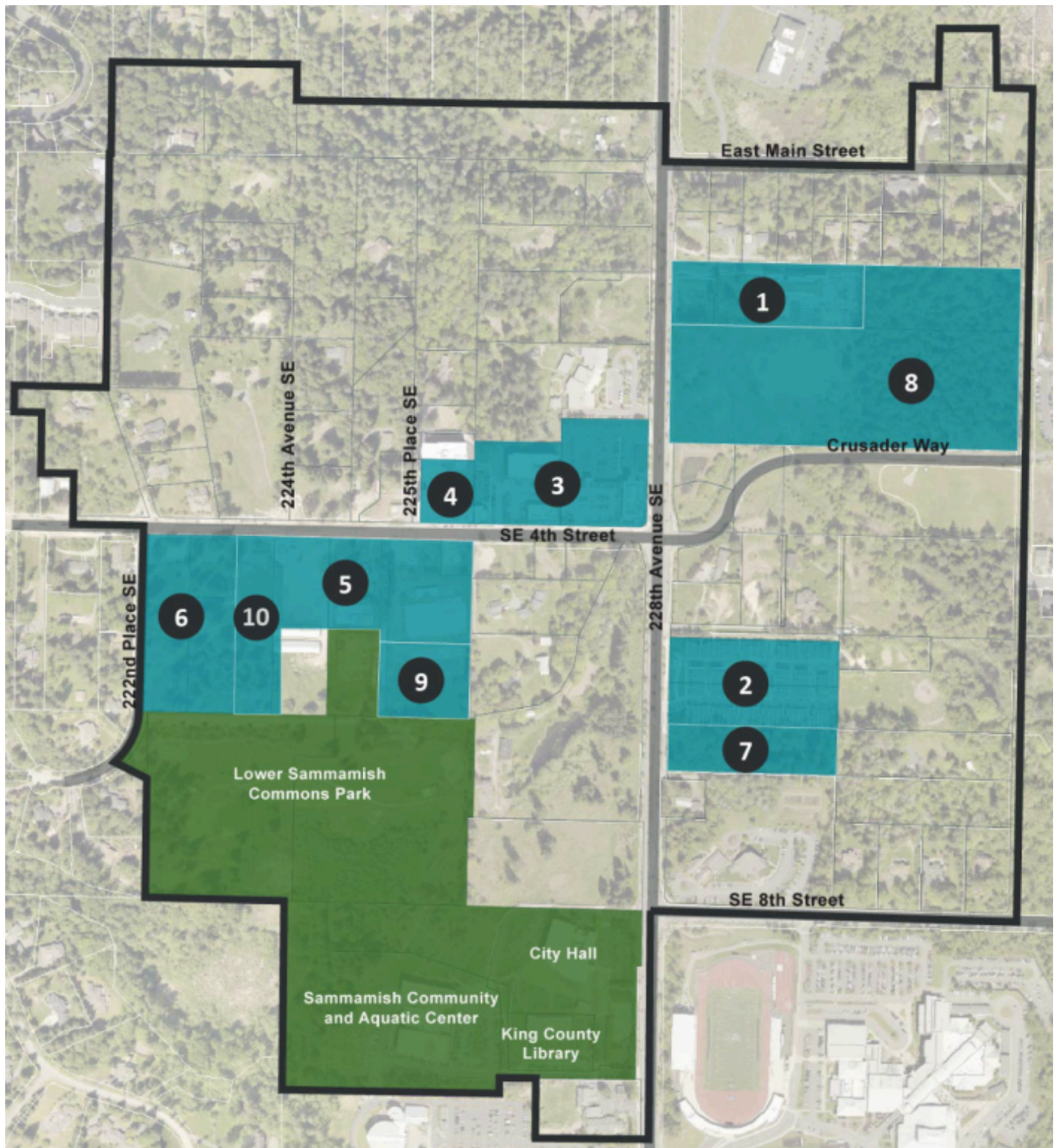


It was 10 years ago that Bellevue-based STCA LLC signed its first contract to purchase land for what would become part of a future Town Center in Sammamish — and work on the project has finally begun.

“This will be Sammamish’s downtown that it never had,” Matthew Samwick, CEO of Innovation Realty Partners LLC and managing member of STCA, said during a tour earlier this year of some of the 90 acres his company acquired from 2015 to 2019 for the Sammamish Town Center project.

The acreage is contiguous, except where it’s bisected by roads inside the city’s roughly 240-acre Town Center planning area. That 240-acre area is generally bounded by East Main Street, Southeast 8th Street, 233rd Place Southeast, and 222nd Place Southeast. The city’s Town Center project area also includes the 30-acre Sammamish Commons Park, which comprises the Upper Commons with City Hall, a police station, YMCA, county library, a plaza, skatepark, outdoor basketball court, and play equipment; and Lower Commons, which includes a community garden, native plant garden, trails, shelters, playground, and grassy areas that border Phases I and II of Innovation Realty Partners’ project.

STCA owns 70% of the developable acres yet to be built within the Town Center designated area. Innovation Realty Partners, or IRP, also of Bellevue, is responsible for managing the project and overseeing the development and completion of the Town Center, according to IRP’s website.



This map shows the general boundaries of the city of Sammamish's 240-acre Town Center planning area. Innovation Realty Partners' first two phases of Sammamish Town Center include Nos. 5, 6, 9, and 10 on the map, with 5 being apartment units, senior citizen assisted living units, townhouses, and commercial/retail space; 6 being Brownstones West townhomes; 9 being multifamily residential and commercial/retail space; and 10 being Brownstones East townhomes. Already built and operating within the city's larger planning area are the Samm Apartments, 1; Sammamish Townhomes, 2; The Village at Sammamish Town Center, whose tenants include Metropolitan Market, 3; and Sky Sammamish Apartments, 4. Aegis Living plans a senior housing facility at site No. 7. Lake Washington School District has site No. 8, where plans for a high school were put on hold last year.

Courtesy city of Sammamish

The city of Sammamish in 2008 adopted the Town Center Plan, a comprehensive vision to transform Sammamish Town Center into an urban hub. It aims to create a vibrant and family-friendly gathering place that strikes a harmonious balance between urban and natural elements, according to the city's website.

That hub has been missing. Instead, Sammamish has pockets of retail, restaurants and offices spread along 2½ miles of the city's main drag, 228th Avenue Southeast and Northeast, the largest comprising the Sammamish Highlands strip center that includes a Safeway, Trader Joe's, Petco, Mod Pizza, other businesses, and a few professional offices next to Eastlake High School.

IRP's Sammamish Town Center development will create an urban nucleus that will include much-needed multifamily and attached single-family housing, retail, dining, and more in a compact, walkable setting. All told, IRP's initial two phases of the multiyear project, at completion, is planned to include 83 townhomes and about 640 apartment units, including a Merrill Gardens senior-living facility. About 100,000 square feet of commercial space is also planned.

Future phases of the city's 240-acre planning area, including STCA's holdings, will be planned over time.

The Town Center, in addition to its own green space in a 1.37-acre "notch" park, borders the Lower Commons park area, which connects to the nearby Sammamish Community YMCA and other municipal facilities — all integral components connected to the future Town Center hub.



Construction crews work in late January on a large underground stormwater vault in the Sammamish Town Center area. The vault will have a capacity of more than 1.6 million gallons and is designed to help prevent flooding and reduce erosion in rivers and streams. It will be topped by open space.

John Stearns

Adding a core, services for city

“Sammamish was incorporated in 1999, so it’s the youngest city in western Washington, and it doesn’t have a true Main Street ... and it doesn’t have the services that the people of Sammamish definitely need — not just want but need — and we will be bringing those in phases to Sammamish,” Samwick said during a late-January tour of the property on the plateau above Metropolitan Market, which fronts 228th Avenue Southeast.

Work that began over the winter included the construction of a large underground stormwater vault designed for a high volume of storage within a small footprint. It has a capacity of more than 1.6 million gallons and is served by an existing tributary area of 11.7 acres to help prevent flooding and reduce erosion in rivers and streams. It will be topped by open space, said Samwick, who worked 17 years as a lawyer focused on corporate, real-estate, and construction law before selling his practice and starting a partnership

that acquired and sold finished or near-finished lots in the Portland area. He then founded an apartment-development company, then STCA and IRP in 2015 and 2016, respectively.

As the Town Center developer, IRP is finally bringing to life the plan the city adopted in 2008 to create a mixed-use community known as Sammamish Town Center. IRP encountered some roadblocks along its decadelong journey, but Samwick only looks ahead.

“Those roadblocks were unexpected and disappointing, but they’re behind us now. We got into this project because we take on complicated real-estate projects as a mission statement and try to make sure we protect the environment while implementing best practices — and this one fit our criteria,” he said.

Asked how he maintained his enthusiasm and commitment to the project over 10 years, Samwick said, “You can see it here. We’re making something very important — (which) keeps us engaged. It’s a beautiful city and we’re honored to be able to participate in it and we intend to see it through.”

The first housing will start to poke out of the ground this spring beginning with about 38 townhomes, Brownstones West, followed by about 45 more townhomes, Brownstones East. Bellevue-based Terrene Homes will build Brownstones West and Scottsdale, Arizona-based Taylor Morrison, which has built communities in Kirkland and Redmond, will build Brownstones East. Apartment plans and timing remain fluid, but Samwick would like to see the first 300 apartments and commercial space done by 2027 or 2028.

Abutting IRP’s Town Center project are the existing Sky Sammamish apartments comprising 159 units above 13,000 square feet of retail space, along Southeast 4th Street. That development sits on the hill above Metropolitan Market and several other businesses and professional offices — all part of The Village at Sammamish Town Center within the city’s Town Center planning area. Across 228th, outside IRP’s development but within the city’s Town Center planning area, an Aegis Living senior facility is planned on the other side of 228th from Metropolitan Market and just south, according to a city map. Just north of that along 228th are the existing Samm Apartments, 92 units set back from the street. Just north of the proposed Aegis are the existing Sammamish Townhomes with 75 units.

Bellevue-based Aegis is excited about its project and envisions a 95- to 100-unit property at the site that it anticipates could get underway in first quarter 2026, contingent on broader market variables that are making it difficult to forecast things like materials costs, a company official said.



Matthew Samwick, CEO of Bellevue-based Innovation Realty Partners, is seen in late January next to the 25-acre Lower Commons section of Sammamish Commons Park, which the first two phases of IRP's Sammamish Town Center project will border. On the hill in the background, the Sammamish Community YMCA is visible and part of the 5-acre Upper Commons section.

John Stearns

Reduce off-plateau trips

Sammamish Mayor Karen Howe said the Town Center project holds enormous value for Sammamish.

"If you drove through the city today, you'd be hard-pressed to find anything like an obvious center of town," Howe said in an email. "This is one of those rare opportunities where the city and the property owner have been able to collaborate on community-centric outcomes."

Howe, who's in her fourth year on the city council and first year as mayor, added, "Instead of getting a swath of huge single-family homes, we'll be getting a variety of housing types. Additionally, Sammamish residents will not have to leave the plateau for goods and services."

Residents too often find themselves having to leave the plateau and drive to Redmond or Issaquah for certain items they can't find in Sammamish, she said in an interview. That also takes revenue from the city and generally requires residents to have a vehicle.

"That's actually not what people want," she said. "What people want is walkability. They want to live closer to where they can shop, walk, grab a cup of coffee, the local newspaper, see a friend, see a neighbor, have a sense of community, and walk back to where they live, or walk to transit, or things of that nature. So everybody has a longing, I would say, for that aspect of life and so this is as close as I can think that we're going to actually bring it closer to fruition."

People will use the Town Center services and other features, she said.

"There's a strong contingent that still remember when we used to have an Ace Hardware and they deeply miss — deeply, deeply miss that," Howe said. "This is a desirable area for services to come into because we will frequent them."

Housing options, from price to size, are critical, too, she noted, citing the preponderance of existing homes are single-family detached.

The median sales price for a home in the city was \$1.525 million in February, according to Redfin.

"We need to shrink our footprint," Howe said. "We need to increase our density and in order to do that, they have to provide these housing options, which include everything from duplexes to triplexes to cottage housing to apartments to condos, townhomes — the full range."



This conceptual rendering also shows multifamily housing above retail, a central courtyard for gathering and dining, and a covered performance area, lower right, as part of the future Sammamish Town Center.

Urbal Architecture

Affordable housing in mix

The Town Center project will include some affordable units, Samwick said. About 7% of the 83 townhomes will be affordable for people making 80% of the area median income. The same applies to about 25% of the first 300 apartment units. Samwick hopes the project can offer some units at 50% of AMI.

“Sammamish has been predominantly single-family detached homes, and communities without the proper array of housing stock and housing choices tend to have their own issues,” he said. “A person’s life cycle of housing might be to start small, and as your family grows, the home gets bigger, and then you go back to what downsizers would want. It’s really a question of what else besides single-family detached homes does Sammamish need and it’s single-family attached and mixed-use opportunities. Sammamish can rightsize its housing stock, as best it can, and plug the gaps in its housing spectrum. ... At a core level, that’s what the Town Center is supposed to kick-start.”

It won't be a centuries-old solution, he added, noting Sammamish will need to do more as the region grows. But the Town Center will get housing production and housing choices "very much down the road for the things that Sammamish doesn't have," Samwick said.

The 100,000 square feet of commercial space in IRP's initial two phases will include "social retail," or places to gather for meals and other connections, he said.

"We are honored to build into an underserved commercial market, which is rare these days, especially in a thriving Seattle metro area," Samwick said.

"We've approached every project we've ever started as a privilege," he said. "We look at it as a way of building bridges to community resources — and together we're going to build this; we're just the implementers and planners, if you will. But it's the people of Sammamish who have elected people who designed this plan. It was ahead of its time in our opinion, and that time has come."

Added Samwick, "As Seattle grew up, Bellevue grew up, and as Bellevue grew up, now the east of the Eastside is growing up. And that's the world we find ourselves in — and what an unbelievable blessing for the community that Microsoft is in Redmond and is thriving. Thousands of Sammamish residents make their living at Microsoft and we couldn't be more pleased to have this opportunity to try to meet the standards of the people of Sammamish. Sammamish is a community that's built around excellent educational assets in all respects. We have a mission for affordable housing, nearly doubling affordable housing in Sammamish in our first phase. And we love this project. We like to talk about it. We set very high bars for ourselves. So hopefully this will be the beginning of, as I call it, the east of Eastside, east of Bellevue, metamorphosis from the challenges of growing from a rural or single-family detached area into a more urbanized, thriving suburbia."

John Stearns

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