

Mayor Don Wesely
State of the City Address
June 24, 2002
City Council Chambers

Thank you Madame Clerk, Members of the Lincoln City Council and Ladies and Gentlemen.

I am pleased to be joined by my children Sarah, Amanda and Andrew, and my parents, Ray and Irene.

I am also joined by many members of my administration. I am proud of the team of City Directors and staff we have put together to serve Lincoln.

I am honored as Mayor to address the people of the great city of Lincoln as to the state of our City. Our City is in excellent condition. We can be proud of our past and pleased with our present. We can look to Lincoln's future with hope and confidence. The budget I presented to the City Council earlier today is balanced and for the second year in a row, calls for a small reduction in our city property tax rate, which is already significantly lower than Omaha's and less than 16% of the total property tax bill of Lincolnites.

You know, this would be a good place to end this speech. I'm not sure what I could say that would top what I just said. We're in excellent condition as a City and we don't need a property tax increase. Well, let me tell you why I think things are going so well in Lincoln.

I think Lincoln is so successful because we really do try to get along with one another. We believe in cooperation and partnership. We can see it in the 27 interlocal agreements between the City and County, sharing such services as Personnel, Planning, Purchasing and Economic Development. The 25 year Comprehensive Plan for Lincoln and Lancaster County was just adopted, on time and unanimously, by the Planning Commission, County Board, City Council and me. The beautiful, new Haymarket Park is a partnership with the City, University of Nebraska-Lincoln, Nebco, and the County Board through the Railroad Transportation Safety District.

Antelope Valley is a visionary partnership between the City, University of Nebraska

Lincoln and the Lower Platte South Natural Resources District. The Partnership for Economic Development started with the City and Chamber of Commerce and now we're working with the County, Lincoln Electric System and the University of Nebraska-Lincoln and we're talking with Omaha to see how we might cooperatively help our economies.

The list of partnerships in Lincoln is lengthy. It is also unique. Not many communities have Lincoln's spirit of cooperation.

Another reason for Lincoln's recent success is that not only do we work together but we get things done through strong leadership. Sometimes issues are very difficult and take both a cooperative spirit and strong leadership to move them forward.

By cooperatively building Haymarket Park, we brought minor league baseball back to Lincoln for the first time since 1961 and the UNL baseball and softball teams had great seasons this first year in their new facilities.

The need for East and South Beltways has been seriously discussed since at least 1970. Last year the City and County reached agreement on the routes and approved these projects to finally move forward. The South Beltway is scheduled to begin construction in 2004.

The need for a new roadway, redevelopment and flood protection for the center of the City has been talked about since at least the early 1970's. The Antelope Valley project was approved in 2000 and the official legal transaction completed just a few weeks ago. Construction on this important project will begin this summer.

The future of the Old Federal Building has been in doubt since the late 1970's. Earlier this month we made the tough decision to begin the long needed redevelopment of the building through private investment.

Lincoln cares about preserving our neighborhoods. Keeping a promise made in 1971 when new libraries were opened in Northeast and Southeast Lincoln, two new libraries in new City parks opened in Northwest and Southwest Lincoln this spring. Two new pools have opened recently. The Highlands pool opened three years ago and University Place pool opened this summer. They are wonderful facilities helping great neighborhoods. The need for a Community Recreational Facility in the center of the City has been talked about for years. After much collaborative work with neighborhoods, churches and schools the City opened the beautiful, new "F" Street Community Center this April. We've also made other progress to help our

neighborhoods such as the adoption of a Neighborhood Character Preservation Ordinance and an ordinance restricting additional billboards in the City.

We are taking on our growing traffic congestion and other infrastructure needs. In addition to the Beltway and Antelope Valley, the two largest public works projects in Lincoln's history, East "O" Street has been slated to be widened for at least ten years. This year the project began and is moving forward nicely. The entire project will be done by the winter of next year. We're requiring wider arterial street right of ways in new areas so we can be better prepared for future city growth and its increase in traffic. We've hired a new traffic engineer to help deal with traffic congestion. We've also quadrupled residential street rehabilitation, widened 84th Street, Vine Street, 40th Street and other streets to move traffic.

We've also addressed other infrastructure needs such as accelerating sewer and water projects. We're proposing a vote of the people for a bond to start catching up with sidewalk and trails repair. With all these infrastructure projects we need to address the financing of infrastructure in the City. We are working hard on this important issue. We are trying to determine what is the fair share of the cost of new development to be paid by development and what should be the City's cost. Once we get that fair share determined, we still must determine how best to pay for the City's share of the cost.

As we work through this extremely difficult issue, I am very mindful of the need to nurture and build Lincoln's economy. That is why we hired an Economic Development expert to help the City, County and Lincoln Electric System. Instead of stepping back, we are stepping forward and stepping up our efforts to promote greater economic development and good jobs in Lincoln. It is one of my top priorities. I have personally been meeting with major employers to see how the City can be of help. I was very pleased with the recent opening of a new rail car production facility at Kawasaki. This plant has the potential of hiring up to 900 people. Again, the City cooperated with the County and State to provide the infrastructure to help this project.

Our downtown is strong. The Haymarket is bursting with reinvestment and development. So much so that this fall, we will open a big new parking garage down there, to try to keep up. Meanwhile, we are bringing new life to the landmark Old Federal Building, connecting the Haymarket to a thriving entertainment district and center of commerce. Investors are realizing what we already know: downtown Lincoln is the place to be.

The City has cooperated with many local partners on some nationally recognized

affordable housing projects such as Cyrilla Court, Old Riley School and Olympic Heights.

Lincoln values our excellent schools. I was pleased to see our City support the building of two new high schools in southwest and north Lincoln, to help relieve crowded schools and maintain our quality education.

I am also pleased with the Community Learning Centers being established in key neighborhood schools to bring our community together to help all our students achieve their potential.

Lincoln encourages active citizen involvement in our City's decision making process. Our City Ombudsman and Town Hall meetings help address citizens' concerns. But sometimes it is hard to know what people really want. For instance, last year a person wrote the City Council "I do not want to have ornamental lighting on my block." Two days later she wrote again, "Please ignore my last note. I would like to have ornamental lights. I won't change my mind again." Another person wrote to the Council, "Please think independently, and do what we want." Everybody likes streets repaired, nobody likes detours. Balancing the needs of different interests is never easy but always necessary.

We have prioritized public safety. When I took office in 1999, the Police Department was underpaid and understaffed. Over the past three years we increased the number of police officers by 13 and we will increase most police officer's salaries by nearly 30% over three years. With our tough economic times, we asked our City employees to accept a 4% salary increase for next year instead of the 8 or 9% most were eligible to receive. The Police Union, LCEA and ATU (3 unions) said they wanted to retain their contractual salary increases. The only other alternative to save personnel costs, which are 71% of our budget, is to reduce the number of city employees. In negotiations with city unions, it became clear we couldn't exempt the police from cuts or the other city employees would feel it was unfair for them to accept cuts in their salaries and benefits. My respect for our police officers continues to be great. The bottom line is our police officers will receive their salary increase next year but a net of six positions will be cut. As soon as financially feasible, these positions will be restored and even more police officers added. I am grateful to the Firefighters, NAGE and management employees acceptance of salary and benefit savings totaling nearly \$1.5 million. Their sacrifice for our City is a key to balancing our budget.

I'm very proud that we have resolved the long-standing dispute over ambulance service

in the City. The Fire Department began providing ambulance service on January 1, 2001. They are doing a great job and keeping their promise of better, faster, cheaper ambulance service. As the City grows, to keep up our excellent fire and rescue service, we need to add two new fire stations north and south. We will propose a Bond for the approval of the public to protect our growing City.

Public safety continues to be a top priority for me. This city will remain safe and secure. Public Safety is on all our minds since the terrorist attacks of September 11th. This terrible tragedy brought out the best in many Americans. In Lincoln, people lined up to donate blood at our Blood Bank within hours of the attack. In the days that followed, cars lined up at sites set up to collect donations to help the victims of the attack. As I helped collect donations, I saw the tears in the eyes of people as they drove up, put money in our buckets and then drove off without saying a word. They didn't have to. Their generosity and compassion said it all. We care about our fellow Americans. We care about our community. This is our home. We need each other. It was obvious on September 11th; it is imperative now. I call on Lincolnites to keep alive the patriotism and community spirit that soared after the September 11th attacks.

Together we accomplish more than we can individually. Together, our predecessors built this state, and the great City of Lincoln. Now it's our turn. For our families and for the generations to come, let us create a legacy of achievement. Antelope Valley, the Beltways, a vibrant downtown, good schools, safe neighborhoods, beautiful parks, a thriving economy with good jobs, a healthy environment and inspiring libraries will be among our gifts to our children and their children.

We will leave them a city even better than the one we inherited. It will be our gift to them. A great Capital City on these great plains stretching as far as the eye can see and reaching toward our hopes and dreams.

May God Bless America, Nebraska and Lincoln -- where together, all things are possible.