4 Placemaking

This chapter describes principles and strategies intended to preserve and enhance the community's unique character — its sense of place — through preservation of cultural and historic resources and focused attention to the quality of public and private development.

Introduction

The people of Lincoln and Lancaster County have transformed a rolling prairie into a fertile agricultural landscape, with significant tracts of native prairie and a dozen villages, towns, and small cities, surrounding a highly livable urban place. The jewel in this fine setting is the Nebraska State Capitol, one of America's great buildings, which was designed and constructed to be seen and enjoyed from throughout the city and county. Together, the urban and the rural landscapes produce a distinctive place, offering a sense of identity to visitors and especially to residents. It is worthwhile to plan for, protect, and strengthen this character as the community grows and matures. All parts of LPlan 2040 contribute to the attainment of this vision, but urban design and one of its components, historic preservation, relate most directly to guarding and enhancing the community's physical image.

Urban design is the concept and practice of studying people's experience of their physical environment—both visual and functional—then consciously striving to improve that experience. It is essential both to preserve and enhance key existing elements and to create improvements that mesh with and strengthen a distinctive and enjoyable place. When

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successful, urban design and historic preservation make a community more enjoyable for residents, more attractive to visitors, and more competitive in drawing new businesses and retaining existing ones. A truly sustainable community recognizes and builds on its heritage by fostering good urban design, creating a sense of place and uniqueness that supports a strong economy, values environmental assets, and promotes social engagement and interaction. Successful urban design requires cooperation of public and private sectors.

A unique urban design asset of Lincoln and Lancaster County, providing orientation and identity throughout the community, is our remarkable State Capitol. The 400-foot tower was planned and built as the key historic, architectural, and geographic landmark of the city and surrounding countryside.

The Setting

Enhancing a community's environment begins with understanding it. Before all else, Lancaster County was and is the land—rolling prairie, crisscrossed by streams, enriched by wetlands, green in the spring and summer, golden, tan, and russet in the fall and winter. We and our ancestors have largely transformed this prairie land through agriculture and city-building, but the seasonal cycle still strongly shapes us. Past policies and practices discouraging urban sprawl, maintaining a clear edge between urban and rural land uses, and preserving natural features and prime agricultural land have done much to establish the distinctive and attractive built environment of our community.

The City

Upon the prairie, the original designers and developers of Lincoln laid out a grid of streets, alleys, and blocks, from A Street on the south to U Street on the north, and from 1st Street on the west to 17th Street on the east. The gently rolling terrain accommodated this grid, creating a framework for a city which was readily comprehensible and expandable. The suburban towns founded east of the city in the 1880s and '90s aligned their grids with Lincoln, facilitating their integration into Lincoln a few decades later. Much of the Original Plat remains evident, giving form to the center of the city through such major features as the Capitol location, the core of University of Nebraska-Lincoln's downtown campus, the County/City Building location, three sites used by Lincoln Public Schools, and Cooper Park. Especially wide rights-of-way provide vistas to the Capitol and campus. Throughout Downtown and the Haymarket, the range of possibilities within the ample, "ordinary" 100-foot rights-of-way is demonstrated by the loading docks, sidewalk cafes, public art, landscaping, and Farmers Market, along with vehicular, bicycle, and pedestrian circulation.

Most of Lincoln's early expansion simply extended the grid. By the early 20th century, the best developments were more varied in their response to the topography, developing curving streets and boulevards while maintaining ample, comprehensible connections to the grid of arterial streets.

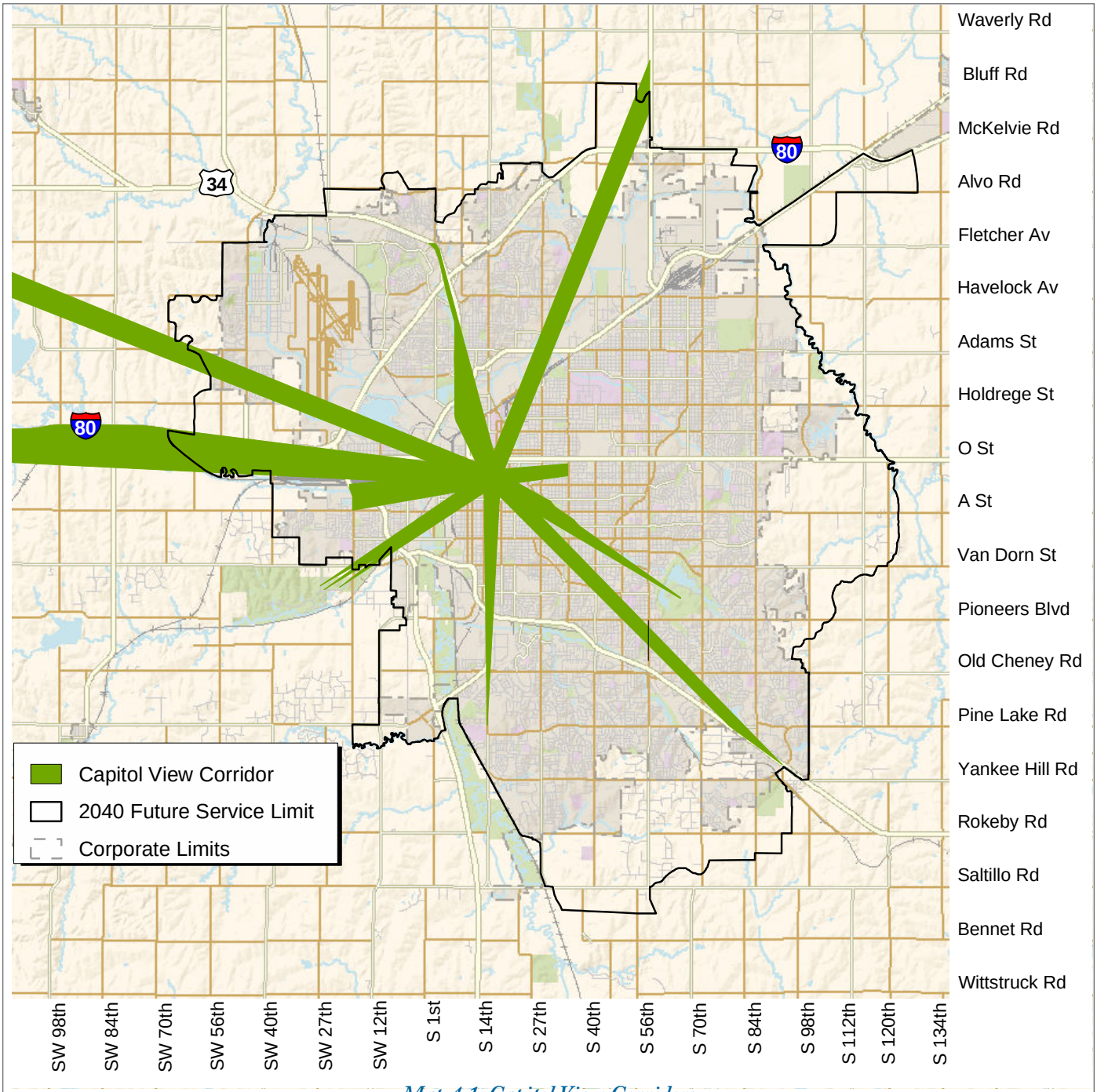
The Capitol

A unique urban design asset of Lincoln and Lancaster County, providing orientation and identity throughout the community, is our remarkable State Capitol. The 400-foot tower was planned and built as the key historic, architectural, and geographic landmark of the city and surrounding countryside. From distant vistas along Interstate 80 to intimate glimpses from core neighborhoods, views of the Capitol enrich and unify this place. Many of the best elements of Lincoln's built environment are based on Capitol views—the Malls, the tree-framed vistas from Pioneers Park, and the homeowners' park in Woodsshire Historic District. Protecting key vistas that provide important public views to the

Capitol, along with identification and enhancement of new view corridors as the community grows, are important urban design strategies of this plan.

Corridors

Other important resources for providing community identity and orientation are entryway corridors, parks, trails, and open spaces. Key entryways provide indelible "first impressions" of a community. The community's strong network of trails offers recreation and transportation alternatives, knitting together established and new neighborhoods. Parks provide neighborhood centers and community gathering places, and along with public street trees are major components of our urban forest, providing shade, beauty, and habitat.



Map 4.1: Capitol View Corridors

Current Practices

The public and private sectors, often working in direct partnership, are both essential to an attractive, livable, competitive built environment. Lincoln's Original Plat of 1867, designed by state officials, established a framework for a successful city. Attractive public and private buildings, city purchases and private donations of park land and of public art, street trees and private gardens, all contribute to urban character.

Many of the principles of this section already are expressed in the community's practices. The *Historic Preservation Commission* and the *Nebraska Capitol Environs Commission* advocate for and protect key resources of our heritage, in cooperation with property owners, the community's design professionals, and other interested citizens.

The Historic Preservation Commission works with neighborhood groups, preservation advocates, property owners, and the State Historical Society to discover, protect, and share the community's heritage. The zoning code provides protection for designated historic property and incentives for creative uses that maintain the vitality of historic places. The Commission has a key role in providing on-going guidance in the revitalization of areas such as Haymarket, residential historic districts, and Havelock Avenue.

The Capitol Environs Commission is a unique board combining membership appointed by the City and by the State, empowered to protect and to advocate for improvements to the setting of the beautiful Nebraska State Capitol. All public and private property within the Capitol Environs District receives the Commission's design oversight, along with key view corridors to the Capitol which enhance the whole community.

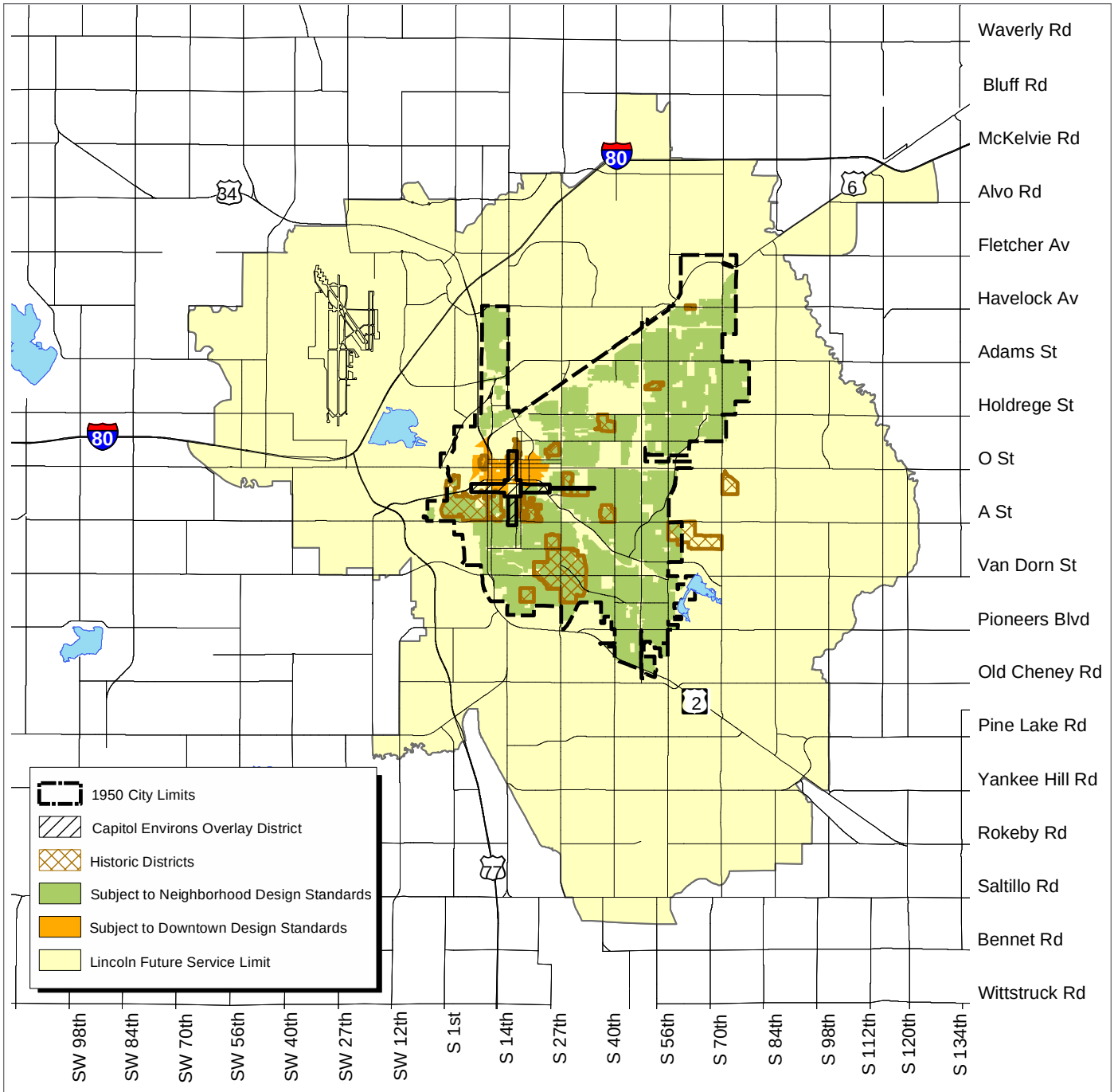
The *Urban Design Committee (*UDC) provides advisory services to city government on the design of city-owned buildings and other public projects, major public/private developments, and any private projects constructed on city right-of-way or other city property. The Committee's intent is to make sure that new public facilities are exemplary – that they provide functional and aesthetically pleasing facilities for the public, and model good design for the private sector. The benefits of this guidance would be strengthened by including all public projects under UDC review, just as the Environs Commission reviews projects of all local and state governmental units. The Committee also works to publicize and reward good design, private as well as public, through an annual awards program.

Certain high-impact projects may involve historic properties and public property or public assistance, and the expertise and advice of more than one design board may be valuable. At the discretion of the City, joint meetings may occasionally be scheduled so that the boards, the project, and ultimately the community may benefit by a thorough yet efficient discussion.

All three of these design boards assist in the process of siting wireless communication antennae and towers within their various jurisdictions. The community values efficient and effective telecommunications while also desiring to minimize adverse impacts of this rapidly evolving infrastructure on our rural and urban environments. Capitol view corridors, historic landmarks and districts, environmentally sensitive areas, and predominantly residential neighborhoods are not preferred locations. Unobtrusive locations on public property; co-locations on existing towers, buildings, and structures; and commercial and industrial areas with minimal impact on residences are preferred.

The City has adopted zoning provisions to state the community's preferences. Combined with guidance from the design review boards, community residents and the telecommunications industry can be well-served.

The community has also expressed its interest in good urban design through the *Neighborhood Design Standards* for infill development in older residential neighborhoods and the Lincoln *Downtown Design Standards* for the community's center. However, the appearance of other commercial areas and new residential areas is guided by few public design standards, although private design covenants in some areas are far more stringent than any public requirements. Good urban design includes an attractive streetscape, pedestrian access and comfort, and orientation of



Map 4.2: Historic & Capitol Environs Districts

buildings, yards, and parking to create a pleasant transition between public and private space.

When developments ignore these elements, our community is weakened. The "Neighborhoods & Housing" chapter describes the community's expectations for new residential development. The emphasis in LPlan 2040 on mixed-use redevelopment in established commercial centers and corridors necessitates adoption of clear design standards and a predictable process to protect existing and new investors—commercial and residential—in those areas. The "Mixed Use Redevelopment" chapter discusses how mixed use redevelopment, including residences, can meet important community needs as Lincoln grows and ages.

Guiding Principles

- The 400-foot State Capitol is the key historic, architectural, and geographic landmark of the city and surrounding countryside. Views to the Capitol are highly valued by the people of Lancaster County and the State of Nebraska and should be protected and enjoyed for generations. The community's opportunity to benefit from the Capitol is further enhanced by improvements to its immediate setting, especially to the axial malls which extend from the Capitol in the cardinal directions, such as Centennial Mall.

Design standards should be developed, monitored, and revised as necessary to express and protect community values without imposing burdensome delays or restrictions on creativity.

- Public buildings and structures should be well built, durable, and highly functional. Most should be designed to blend attractively within the context of surrounding development. Major civic structures should serve as focal points in the community and should be of superior, even iconic, design. All public projects should be worthy to serve as guides for future development or redevelopment.
- Implementation of the Salt Valley Greenway, described in the *Environmental Resources* chapter, offers a long-term opportunity to enhance all of Lancaster County and to strengthen the essential juncture of rural and urban land uses.
- Major entryways to Lincoln including Interstate 80 and its exits (especially I-180), Highways 77 and 34 from the north, Cornhusker Highway from the east and from the Airport on the west, O Street from the east and west, Homestead Expressway/Highway 77/Rosa Parks Way from the southwest and west, and Highway 2 from the southeast, should be studied, protected, and enhanced to create and express community pride.
- Public art is an important means by which the community can strengthen a sense of place and promote a positive image.
- Public property, especially publicly owned historic property, is a community trust and should be maintained, preserved, and utilized in an exemplary fashion. Most historic property is and should be privately owned and maintained.
- The community's distinctive character and desirable quality of life for current residents and for future generations should be supported by exercising stewardship of historic resources throughout the county, while maximizing benefits of past investments in public infrastructure and private property. The Plan encourages the continued use and maintenance of historic resources, including properties not formally designated as landmarks.
- Design standards should be developed, monitored, and revised as necessary to express and protect community values without

imposing burdensome delays or restrictions on creativity. Well-crafted standards should add predictability and clarity to the development process, rather than imposing a design solution. Design standards for landscape elements should be developed, updated periodically and monitored and enforced with attention to long-term sustainability, or the benefit of this investment can quickly be lost.

- Historic areas and quality new development share underlying aspects of good design—durable materials, thoughtful attention to maintaining or creating a desirable overall setting, accessibility by multiple modes and all people, well-designed and effective signs that communicate without dominating, and sustainable, maintainable landscaping.

Strategies

Urban Design Standards

- Continue to identify and maintain high-value Capitol View Corridors and protect those views through regulations and guidelines, including vistas that gain in prominence as the community grows. Structures that may interfere with these public corridors should be reviewed by the Capitol Environs Commission and a recommendation made within the context of their overall effect upon the view.
- Establish clear urban design standards and an efficient, expeditious review process for development and redevelopment of mixed use commercial/residential areas, especially focusing on the interface with residential neighborhoods, attractive streetscapes, and safe and comfortable movement of people — whatever their mode of travel.
- Prepare and periodically update subarea plans for the redevelopment of mixed use corridors and nodes to facilitate predictable, expeditious, well-designed improvements and investments.

Monitor and update the *Downtown Master Plan* periodically, as the adopted guide to redevelopment of the community's center, as identified in the *Vision & Plan* chapter.

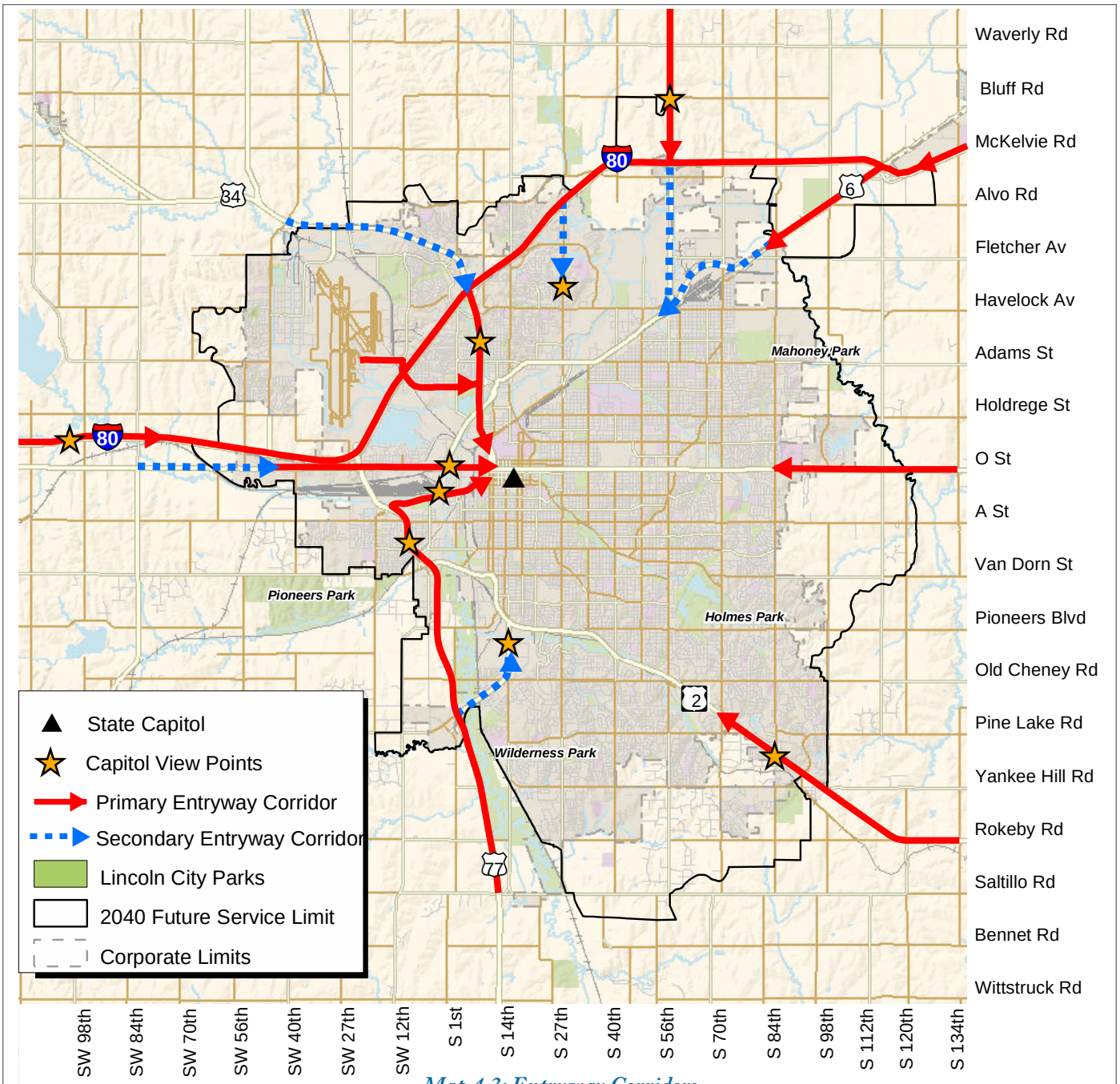
- Extend the contributions of Urban Design Committee to advise on building projects of Lancaster County and other local government agencies as appropriate.

Entry Corridors and Public Art

- Study key entryways to Lincoln and adopt zoning tools and incentives to protect and enhance "first impressions" of the community, including a thoughtful, distinctive, and attractive system of "wayfinding" signs to key community attractions.
- Continue and update a wayfinding system of related, attractive signs guiding and orienting motorists, bicyclists, and pedestrians throughout the community.
- Preserve and enhance the character of key entry points and corridors into the City of Lincoln through enhanced landscaping and public art in rights-of-way, and respectful development of adjacent properties.

Figure 4.1: Downtown Wayfinding Guide Sign

- The corridors along I-180 from Interstate 80 to the entry into Downtown, and from Lincoln Municipal Airport along Cornhusker Highway to the interchange with I-180 should be a special focus for public/private partnerships to identify special themes and appropriate sites for public art.
- Support implementation of the *Public Arts Master Plan* for the City of Lincoln which



Map 4.3: Entryway Corridors

identifies art projects and policies that enhance the cultural fabric of the City.

- Strengthen design standards for commercial and mixed-use development along major travel corridors, to reflect a positive visual image that engenders community pride and identity.
- The inclusion of public art should be considered during the conceptualization and design of any major public project.
- Seek the early integration of the talents of artists with architects, landscape architects and engineers on public improvements.

Historic Preservation

- Expand the community's historic preservation program to include Lancaster County through interlocal agreements between Lancaster County, the City of Lincoln, and other incorporated communities. Widen the scope of the mission and membership of the Historic Preservation Commission to include all of Lancaster County.
- Lincoln and Lancaster County should work in partnership with state and federal historic preservation programs, but local landmark protections are usually the most effective and appropriate.
- Continuously monitor and improve local programs and regulations, especially working to balance conflicting regulations that may offer alternatives to achieve life-safety goals while protecting threatened historic resources.
- City and county governmental policies should provide for the protection and enhancement of historic resources.
- Continue to inventory, research, evaluate, and celebrate the full range of historic resources including standing structures, distinctive neighborhoods and regions, landscapes, and buried cultural materials throughout Lancaster County, collaborating with individuals, associations, and institutions.
- Designate landmarks and districts through the local preservation ordinance and the National Register of Historic Places.
- Seek incentives and regulatory support to maintain, rehabilitate, and minimize energy utilization of existing buildings in order to make it more feasible to rehabilitate and continue to use older buildings.
- Implement a public policy of the careful stewardship of significant, publicly owned historic resources, including a full and open examination of alternatives when major alterations or demolition are considered. Consider designation of such resources under the preservation ordinance to demonstrate leadership and standardize review of proposed changes.
- Continue the educational outreach effort of the historic preservation program through tours, publications, on-line information, and presentations, in order to share the results of historic preservation and research with the broadest audience of residents and visitors.

- Monitor local preservation efforts and local, state, and federal incentive programs to improve and apply the most effective tools for preserving, maintaining, and utilizing historic resources as fully utilized components of the community.
- Include a procedure in the preservation ordinance for temporary protection of significant historic resources threatened with demolition, to allow time to explore and implement alternatives.
- Support and participate in neighborhood, community, and statewide groups interested in historic preservation.
- Encourage protection and discourage destruction of buried cultural resources either by vandals, looters, or insensitive construction.

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