

Stronger Safer Neighborhoods:

Answers to questions from March 2008 meeting

The following questions were generated at the March 18, 2008 meeting held at First Plymouth Congregational Church. Answers are as of April 14, 2008.

Answers from Near South Neighborhood Association

**Scott Baird, President
613-4460, scottbaird2@gmail.com**

Is the focus of the meeting just Near South and Everett neighborhoods?

No. As I looked around the room at the more than three hundred people present, I saw representation from many different neighborhoods, many different cultures, and many different economic backgrounds. The thing that brings us all together is a passion to make our community better. Programs that help Near South and Everett can and will be replicated in other neighborhoods. Lincoln must grow as one community. Strengthening one neighborhood ultimately strengthens the entire community.

Answers from NeighborWorks@Lincoln

**Michael Snodgrass, Executive Director
477-7181, msnodgrass@nwlincoln.org**

What can be done to help lenders and Realtors encourage homebuyers to look in the neighborhoods near downtown?

Revitalize the area. Lenders and Realtors follow the money. An investment in these older neighborhoods will result in more attractive neighborhoods and homes which make the jobs of lenders and realtors much, much easier.

Many older apartment buildings and house conversions have high vacancies – are there any ideas for de-converting or replacing them?

Yes, NeighborWorks@Lincoln and others are looking at converting and de-converting buildings back into single-family housing. The problem is that we don't have adequate tools/money to cover the "gap" at this moment, and thus there is the need to work cooperatively with the City and other leaders in identifying ways to fill the gaps.

Are there resources / laws to encourage landlords improve their buildings?

Rental licensing should be viewed as a way to encourage landlords to improve their buildings. Unfortunately rental licensing has not ever revoked any licenses to date, thus rewarding the bad landlords the same as the good landlords.

How will revitalization efforts effect housing for low income and homeless populations?

At this moment, there is no lack of affordable housing for low-income populations in these neighborhoods. There are also several programs tailored to homeless populations therefore at this moment there is not a need for our assistance.

If gentrification becomes a reality – and it's highly doubtful this will take place for the next decade or two – then NeighborWorks®Lincoln stands ready to work on issues related to only housing low-income households.

Are there property tax abatement or credit programs available for those buying or rehabbing homes in the area?

There is a Historic Property Tax “freeze” if you are rehabbing a Historic Properties. It's called the Valuation Incentive Program and can be found online at http://www.nebraskahistory.org/histpres/HP_brochure.pdf. Otherwise, there is no property tax abatement available of which I am aware, and I have been told that this is a Nebraska Constitution problem.

What financial assistance is available for those rehabbing homes in the area?

If you qualify for a NeighborWorks®Lincoln and City of Lincoln program you may be eligible for up to a \$25,000 soft second mortgage (grant) to purchase and rehab your house. If you are an owner-occupied residence you may be eligible for a PRIDE grant administered by the City of Lincoln and Urban Development.

Answers from

REOMA (Real Estate Owners and Managers Association)

Lynn Fisher, President

Phone 465-4401 (REOMA office), www.reomalincoln.org

How can landlords help improve neighborhoods?

Are there resources / laws to encourage landlords improve their buildings?

REOMA members have a vested interest in helping make changes which improve the quality of life in our core neighborhoods. Most of the properties owned by our members are in older areas of the city. We support efforts to reduce crime, improve the physical condition and appearance of properties, and raise the quality of living in these neighborhoods. These efforts benefit our members by increasing our property values, lowering our work load, and -- more importantly -- making it easier to find and keep good quality residents for our buildings. So we should all work together to restore good quality of life in our core areas. REOMA members want to be good citizens and successful business people.

In Lincoln, the vast majority of property owners are good citizens and should not be made to pay additional taxes or fees for the problems caused by the minority. The small minority who are part of the problem should be held accountable and be made to change. For a property owner to have bad tenants and/or a poorly maintained property, it is voluntary and intentional or the result of financial hardship and/or ignorance.

For those owners who purposely maintain a problem property, there should be firm enforcement of existing laws to cause changes. Owners who don't have the resources to make changes should sell the property. For those owners who don't know about resources and information available to them, help should come from the city, neighborhood associations and REOMA. We are able to provide advice and direction about how to operate rental property for the success of the

owner and benefit of the neighborhood. We can share simple ways to screen prospective tenants for credit and criminal histories. We teach good business practices including ways to maintain properties which we are willing to share. Smart property owners should want to join REOMA for ongoing education and involvement with the business of rental property management.

As for new laws, an ordinance to require trash service would be acceptable to REOMA. However until the city and specifically the Building and Safety Department can enforce current laws with the effect of actually solving some chronic problem property issues we can't support expanding the issuance of occupancy certificates to single family and duplex rentals. We would support a change in the density standards for new developments which force developers to build too many apartments.

***Answers from
Lincoln Police Department
Tom Casady, Chief of Police
441-7237, tcasady@lincoln.ne.gov***

What are the top three law enforcement priorities for core neighborhoods?

Drug offenses, prostitution, and public order crimes (such as disturbing the peace, consuming alcohol in public, littering, graffiti, wild parties, and abandoned vehicles.)

Has the police department shifted / increased resources to deal with the crime increase in the Southwest team area? How does the budget break out for the different teams?

We haven't had any increases in the number of officers in the past few years, but there are often changes in how they are assigned. Officers are distributed across the city, the calendar, and the clock based on the workload in the area, time, and days. A more detailed explanation is available at:
<http://lpd304.blogspot.com/2008/01/not-wild-guess.html>

In addition, for the past two years, we have been flooding this area on several annual occasions with a detail of police, probation, and parole officers known as "Project Safe Neighborhoods." PSN let's us put additional resources in the vicinity to proactively contact people under correctional control, and law breakers. It has resulted in a very large number of contacts, citations, and arrests. It will continue this spring and summer.

Won't increasing police efforts just move criminals to other neighborhoods?

Possibly, but systematic changes can help citywide. Getting landlords, for example, more accustomed to running background checks and keeping track of police calls--and holding them accountable--doesn't just move the problem. If you can keep the heat on trouble makers and petty criminals, even if it at first just pushes them around the map--you can make the entire community less hospitable to their chosen life style or profession. This is undoubtedly one of the reasons we don't have the severity of crime problems that you see in some nearby cities. Displacement can accomplish the following:

- it can move problems into areas where they are more easily managed
- it can reduce the concentration, lessening the impact of "critical mass"
- ultimately, problems can even be displaced out of the city entirely

How can we educate the public about gang activity in Lincoln?

Pretty good resource here:

<http://www.lincoln.ne.gov/city/police/pdf/gangstrategy.pdf>

Will there be more bicycle officers on patrol?

You will be seeing more officers walking (and possibly cycling) in our focus area this year when they are not responding to incidents and dispatches.

What police efforts are being focused at Cooper Park near 8th & D Streets?

Cooper Park gets patrolled as much or more as any park in Lincoln, I would say - probably more than most because of the school resource officer who visits Park Middle School regularly. We do occasional undercover work in and around the park. We really depend on watchful citizens who will notify us when illegal or suspicious activity is occurring.

Answers from

Lincoln-Lancaster Co. Health Department

Harry Heafer City/County Health Department

441-8035, hheafer@lincoln.ne.gov

Can we expand litter pick up programs like the Great American Cleanup?

I'm excited to hear that people were aware of Keep America Beautiful's Great America Cleanup and its value in helping make a community and neighborhood a cleaner, safer place to live.

Keep Lincoln & Lancaster County Beautiful is the local affiliate of KAB and promotes the GAC and litter cleanups, not only during March - May but anytime of the year. Citizens are always encouraged to do cleanup efforts year round on a regular basis and not wait for an annual neighborhood cleanup to get rid of junk. I usually have trash bags that I can provide to volunteers for picking up litter around their neighborhoods, including alleys. One way to help reduce litter is for folks to take a plastic grocery bag along when out taking a walk. Another simple way to reduce the amount of litter in neighborhoods is to use trash cans with lids (required by city ordinance) and to make sure the lids stay on the cans when setting out trash on pick-up days.

I also encourage residents to remove weeds, volunteer trees and shrub growth, especially from alleys as unkempt alleys add to the image of an uncared for neighborhood. This material may be set out with one's regular trash however it does need to be cut into three foot lengths and tied into bundles to make it easier for the refuse hauler to pick them up.

The GAC is Keep America Beautiful's signature annual event that runs from March - May of each year to encourage citizens to get involved in helping make their community a better place to live through litter cleanups, beautification projects and other related activities that bring neighborhood residents and the community together.

Answers from
Realtors® Association of Lincoln
Doug Rotthaus, Executive Vice-President
441-3620, www.lincolnrealtors.com

What can be done to help lenders and Realtors encourage homebuyers to look in the neighborhoods near downtown?

The REALTORS® have an Affordable Housing Committee that is busy planning their second annual Housing Fair and their efforts go hand in hand with neighborhood revitalization efforts.

REALTORS® never discourage buyers from looking in the core neighborhoods. Generally, the buyer provides the individual sales agent with their housing criteria and the agent's job is to expand those choices. No doubt, there are assumptions which real estate agents make that are related to their perceptions of what the buyer wants or what the buyer will be happy with after the purchase. In any event, the agent's fiduciary responsibility is to the buyer (their client) and they will strive to make all neighborhood information available to the potential buyer. Nothing that is considered "material" to the buyer should ever be hidden.

As an association we were sad to see the demise of the Heart of Lincoln program and the notoriety it received. The program helped buyers become aware of the "gems" that exist in Lincoln's core neighborhoods. If there can be a joint effort with all interested parties, including the REALTORS® and others in the business community, the resources available might be maximized to help your efforts. We think LPS would be a good partner to bring into the conversation too. The positive facets and accomplishments of the schools in these neighborhoods should be accentuated. Parents often choose a neighborhood because of the academic standing of the school. If work needs to be done in this area, talk to the administration about what can be done and what needs to be done in order to raise the academic standing of the school.

The positive aspects of homeownership also need to be emphasized. It is important to note that many of the financing programs that were associated with the Heart of Lincoln still exist. It is only the umbrella under which they were promoted that went away. These programs should be emphasized along with neighborhood improvement and redevelopment projects.

Answers from
City Building & Safety Department
Mike Merwick, Director
441-7521, mmerwick@lincoln.ne.gov

Do all houses have to display street number addresses?

Yes. Housing Code section 501.2 as amended by Lincoln Municipal Code section 21.01.070 requires that all existing buildings have approved addresses or numbers plainly visible and legible from the street or road fronting the property.

Are there resources/laws to encourage landlords improve their buildings?

Chapter 21 of the Lincoln Municipal Code outlines the Minimum Housing Code requirements for all existing residential structures in the City and within the three mile radius. These codes are designed to safeguard life or limb, health, property and public welfare by regulating and controlling the use and occupancy, location and maintenance of all residential buildings and structures within this jurisdiction.

Chapter 5.38 of the Lincoln Municipal Code outlines the requirements for a permit to operate apartments, hotels, motels, and boarding house in the City of Lincoln. The owner is required to maintain their buildings in compliance with the Minimum Housing Code. Additionally, the owner will be subject to the complete interior inspection of their building if the annual complaints reach the level that was outlined by the City Council.

Can we streamline code requirements to help with renovating older houses?

Current Building Codes allow for renovating older houses. Building & Safety has worked with many people on home renovations and de-conversions.

If a person has questions about renovating an older house they can meet with our plan review staff to discuss what they want to do and what permits might need to be taken out. Contact Gordon McGill 441-6424 or Shawn Johnson 441-6174 to assist you. A consultation with a Building Inspector on location with the remodeler could also be arranged.

If anyone has a concern with renovations using the existing codes please send the concern to Mike Merwick, mmerwick@lincoln.ne.gov and your concern will be reviewed and you will be contacted for discussion.

Answers from Lincoln Public Schools - Community Learning Centers

**Cathy Petsch, Co-coordinator
436-1965, cpetsch@lps.org**

How can schools help create Stronger, Safer Neighborhoods?

Lincoln is fortunate to have been able to maintain strong neighborhood schools while the city's edges continue to grow. Through a seven-year old community initiative, Lincoln Community Learning Centers, there are 23 Community Learning Center schools at 18 elementary and five middle school sites. Please see www.lincolnclc.org.

While Lincoln has a quality education system and a rich array of social service providers, a sizeable number of children still perform below grade level and families still struggle with basic needs. We continue to have neighborhoods that lack a sense of connectedness and access to resources and therefore experience high levels of mobility, violence and crime. The Lincoln Community Learning Centers (CLCs) initiative addresses these risk factors by providing an integrated delivery system of educational and supportive services to children, families and neighborhood residents. The CLC service delivery model requires partnerships which create a community underpinning to address a myriad of issues such as safe affordable housing, affordable childcare, workforce development and accessible health care. CLCs provide an opportunity to address changing needs by building on our community's strengths and assets.

Lincoln's nationally recognized CLC initiative is an effective, efficient and innovative approach designed to link the community, neighborhoods, schools and people of all ages, backgrounds and walks of life. The CLCs vision is clear: Children, youth, families and neighborhood residents will have improved learning outcomes, increased enrichment opportunities and accessible support services because of strong school community partnerships that are connected in meaningful ways. The goals of the Community Learning Centers initiative are to:

- 1) improve student learning and development,
- 2) support and strengthen families, and
- 3) support and strengthen neighborhoods.

By empowering parents and neighborhood residents to have an active leadership role in defining their strengths and needs and by using our schools as the hub of service delivery, CLCs are well positioned to integrate services in a meaningful manner to have the greatest impact.

Grounded in the belief that relationships and collaboration are the cornerstones that create positive systems change, Community Learning Centers use a shared model of leadership. The structure has been designed to support networking among community-based organizations as they plan and deliver services, which address the expressed needs of each individual neighborhood. Lincoln's CLCs strive to go beyond providing safe, positive afterschool programs to being a bridge that reconnects neighborhoods with schools and provides opportunities for parents and other neighborhood residents to become more effective partners in the education of all children and youth in the neighborhood. CLCs assist in addressing childcare issues, which in turn strengthens economic self-sufficiency, reduces family stress and improves work place productivity. An array of community-based service agencies with expertise and experience in providing educational and recreational programs, physical health and behavioral health services, housing referrals and prevention programs all contribute to the achievement of positive outcomes for children, families and neighborhood residents.

School Neighborhood Advisory Committees (SNACs) are the cornerstones of CLC governance and each CLC site or pair of sites has one in operation. SNACs are made up of parents, youth, educators and other school personnel, businesses, neighborhood residents, concerned citizens, community-based organizations and service providers. Their primary function is to assist with planning, communication and oversight of the neighborhood CLC. SNACs are maintained as open grassroots groups with no rigid ratios, appointment processes or membership limits. The membership is inclusive and fluid to allow for adaptation to change and evolve as interest grows, relationships develop and outcomes change. Each SNAC is expected to reflect the uniqueness of its school and neighborhood, building on or coordinating with existing planning structures. For this reason, the committees may look different across sites; however, all of the SNACs operate under a common set of core principles listed below.

- **Collaboration:** There is a process for identifying and selecting partners to deliver program services.
- **Integration:** Service activities tie into the three CLC goals and the CLC annual plan.

- **Lifelong Learning Culture:** The CLC has a range of program opportunities available for children and youth, families and neighborhood residents.
- **Outcome Focused:** The annual plan is developed based on the needs of neighborhood children, families and residents utilizing various sources of information, and its activities are based on site goals and outcomes.
- **Community Leadership:** Membership of the SNAC has both parent and neighborhood resident representation and develops the annual plan.
- **Neighborhood Based:** Community/neighborhood service is part of the regular program activity and the neighborhood association and the CLC work together to support the neighborhood.

Answers from Lincoln-Lancaster Co. Planning Dept.

Marvin Krout, Director

441-7491, mkrou@lincoln.ne.gov

What are the requirements / restrictions for locating group homes or halfway houses?

The City's zoning code contains a variety of classifications for various types of group residential facilities in residential zoning districts, with different rules for the different classifications. Here is a summary of those rules:

Group homes: small (up to 3 residents) homes for disabled individuals and for children are allowed anywhere that a family (which is defined to include up to 3 unrelated individuals) is allowed. Homes for 4 to 15 individuals in this category are allowed conditionally, if spaced 1/4-1/2 mile from other group homes. The City Council after public hearing also may approve a "reasonable accommodation" that would reduce the spacing requirement or other zoning or building code standards.

Halfway houses: these are called Alternative to Imprisonment facilities in the zoning code; for residents who are in the supervision of the court or correctional system in pre-release, work-release or probationary programs; special permits for 4 to 15 residents may be approved by the Planning Commission after public hearing.

Health facilities: nursing homes and other facilities such as homes for individuals with drug abuse problems are classified as health facilities, and require a special permit in residential districts that must be approved by the Planning Commission after public hearing.

Domestic shelters: facilities to house abused individuals are allowed conditionally in residential districts but must be spaced 1 mile from another domestic shelter.

Most of these uses above also are permitted in commercial zoning districts. Temporary shelters for the homeless are only permitted by special permit in the B4 (downtown) and I1 (industrial) zoning districts, only by special permit after public hearing, and only if at least 1000 feet from the nearest group home or domestic shelter.

Can we streamline code requirements to help with renovating older houses?

(See Bldg. & Safety response regarding building code) Renovating older houses sometimes involves additions to primary structures or construction of accessory structures. Occasionally, the current yard/setback requirements in residential districts limits or prevents improvements of this type, even though they would be consistent with the character of the surrounding structures in older neighborhoods. The City Council recently approved amendments to the "special permit for deconstruction/ redevelopment of nonconforming uses" that would provide flexibility for the Planning Commission to reduce the setbacks of the underlying district on a case-by-case basis if the construction fits into this category. Staff could review the yard/setback requirements to see if there are any modifications to lot standards that would provide additional flexibility. For example, expansions of a primary structure might be allowed to expand into yards if they are limited in size and height.

Are there any plans to help create more off-street parking in neighborhoods?

We are not aware of any such plans. New multi-family development would need to meet higher parking ratios than was required up through the 1970s, and should not add to the perceived problems. Some of the streets in Near South are wider than the standard for residential streets and could be selectively striped to provide angled parking, which would add to parking supply and "calm" traffic along these streets.

How does the zoning affect these neighborhoods?

Large portions of the core neighborhoods have been "down-zoned" in recent years. Down-zoning means changing the zoning district from one that allows more uses and higher density to one that is less intensive. Some areas that were zoned to allow apartments have been down-zoned to zones that only allow single family or duplex uses. When zoning reflects the existing predominant use pattern, it is thought likely to create more stability in reinvesting in the buildings that are occupied by those uses. There is less incentive to allow existing buildings to run down and to assemble land in hopes of building a new apartment complex. Single family and even duplex dwellings are more likely to be owner-occupied, and it can be expected that owner-occupants will take a stronger interest in maintaining their buildings to maximize property values and as a matter of pride. On the other hand, the housing market long-term will continue to demand additional apartments and condominiums in the core area, and so some land should be planned to accommodate that demand.

What is to prevent a developer from tearing down good quality housing stock and building big complexes?

See response to question #4 above. Unless a structure is designated as a local historic landmark or is (a contributing structure?) in a landmark district, there are no laws to prohibit demolition. Even the local historic ordinance can only delay, and not permanently prohibit, demolition or alteration of historic landmarks. The scale of redeveloped housing is controlled to some degree by the "Neighborhood Design Standards" which cover all the residential areas within the city limit lines of 1950. These standards go beyond the usual zoning standards of density, height, setbacks and parking to ensure that the general scale, form, and appearance are compatible with the predominant character of nearby residential structures.

Answers from City Urban Development Department

**Wynn Hjernstad, Community Development Manager
441-8211, whjernstad@lincoln.ne.gov**

Many older apartment buildings and house conversions have high vacancies -- are there any ideas for de-converting or replacing them?

Yes. NeighborWorks®Lincoln has applied to the State Department of Economic Development for funds that will be used to finance de-conversions. If funding is approved, details still need to be worked out. Urban Development is also working on developing a de-conversion program. If details and funding can be determined, funding would be available in September, 2008.

Are there resources / laws to encourage Landlords improve their buildings?

Urban Development's PRIDE program is available to landlords (see next question). No other programs are available at this time. The City has a Minimum Housing Code that requires buildings be maintained to a certain standard. If you suspect a building or house does not meet codes, it can be reported by calling the Neighborhood Hotline, 441-6300, or by logging onto the city's Web site, www.lincoln.ne.us then select City Service Requests.

What are the criteria for PRIDE grants?

The PRIDE program is available through the Urban Development Department. The program provides a \$600 grant for material costs for exterior home repairs. It is available in 13 neighborhoods: Clinton, Downtown, East Campus, Everett, Hartley, Havelock, Hawley/Malone, Irvingdale, Near South, North Bottoms, South Salt Creek, University Place and Woods Park. Projects must be completed by August 31 and are awarded on a first-come, first-served basis to households with incomes below 80% of Lincoln's median income. Some restrictions apply for previous recipients. For more information, to obtain an application, or to see if you meet income requirements, call Mary at 441-5668.

How can my neighborhood create a focus area?

The first step is to have a neighborhood association in place that wants to have a focus area. Then contact Wynn in Urban Development, 441-7606, and she can discuss the process with you. However, due to budget cuts and staff cuts, any new focus areas are not likely to be taken on for a few years.

What resources are available for neighborhoods that are not a focus area?

Several housing programs are available for homeowners that income eligible. See Urban Development's Web site: www.lincoln.ne.gov, key word Urban, then select Programs and Services. Under Housing and Homeownership, there are descriptions of available programs and income guidelines.

What is a "blighted" area? How are they chosen? What additional resources become available to "blighted areas?"

An area is declared "blighted and substandard" by the City Council, based on findings in a blight study. Generally, groups, businesses, or individuals approach Urban Development and request a study. The entity asking for the study pays for it. Cost of the study depends on the size of the area and can range from \$500 to several thousand dollars. State Statutes mandate the conditions that must be present in order for an area to be declared blighted. Several criteria are evaluated including: property conditions, condition of streets and sidewalks, age of properties, lot layout, to unemployment and other social issues. The primary

resource available to a blighted area is Tax Increment Financing (TIF). TIF is the increase in property tax resulting from redevelopment of, or improvements to, a property; a portion of the increase in property taxes is put back into the project, to help with redevelopment/improvement costs.

Are there property tax abatement or credit programs available for those buying or rehabbing homes in the area?

Unfortunately, no. Tax abatement programs are available in other states, but not in Nebraska. These programs are initiated at the state level and are not within the control of local governments. In Nebraska, a change would have to be made to the State Constitution to allow these types of programs.

What financial assistance is available for those rehabbing homes in the area?

See Urban Development's Web site: www.lincoln.ne.gov, key word Urban, then select Programs and Services. Under Housing and Homeownership are descriptions of available programs and income guidelines.

Is there additional information on the Web?

Yes, see the City's Web site: www.lincoln.ne.gov keyword Urban to see projects and programs underway at Urban Development. Also, selecting City Service Requests from the home page will provide information about a number of City services. Each City Department can be accessed from the Web site home page and provides information about services offered.