MEETING RECORD

NAME OF GROUP:	PLANNING COMMISSION
DATE, TIME AND PLACE OF MEETING:	Wednesday, April 16, 2014, 2:25 p.m., Hearing Room 113 on the first floor of the County-City Building, 555 S. 10th Street, Lincoln, Nebraska
MEMBERS IN ATTENDANCE:	Cathy Beecham, Michael Cornelius, Tracy Corr, Chris Hove, Maja V. Harris, Jeanelle Lust, Dennis Scheer, Lynn Sunderman and Ken Weber absent. Marvin Krout, Steve Henrichsen, Dave Cary, Ed Zimmer, Christy Eichorn, Tom Cajka, Sara Hartzell, Stacey Groshong Hageman and Teresa McKinstry of the Planning Department; and other interested citizens.
STATED PURPOSE OF MEETING:	Workshop on "Mid-Block Pedestrian Ways and Block Lengths"

Marvin Krout opened the meeting and explained that staff felt the subdivision regulations needed to be reviewed. In the end, a mid-block pedestrian way is just a mitigation for not having a street and block system with connectivity. Staff thought it would be a good time to bring back some standards that could improve on this. At same time, we felt we could do some research and visit with the development community regarding shortening block lengths, so we have more blocks and fewer mid-block pedestrian ways. When staff asked developers to take a look at the proposals, they did not care for them. Staff would like to have a discussion about how the Commissioners would like to see this go forward. He would like to see the mid-block pedestrian changes go to the City Council, at the very least.

Cornelius had the impression that those had been built under a set of regulations that were less than current, mid-block pedestrian ways included. Krout replied that may have been partly his fault. There is not a standard in black and white, in the subdivision regulations.

Steve Henrichsen stated that block length has the potential to be about reducing travel time. Cities are an invention to maximize the exchange of many things and to minimize travel. To a large degree, reducing block length has the potential to have people get out and interact amongst themselves. The big picture is feeling safe, secure and welcoming. There are a lot of things that make a neighborhood walkable. You are trying to get people to move about the neighborhood on foot. There are different levels of service with regard to pedestrian mobility. Trip length is involved. He doesn't think that making blocks longer encourages walking. He hasn't seen anything that would back that up. Shorter blocks and more connection points encourages people to get out and walk.

In the past, there were joint meetings with the Board of Health and the Planning Commission. They talked about the public health implications and how public health can

be improved by community design. A walkable neighborhood encourages more walking. Public health officials across the country have become more concerned with getting people out and about. Inactivity is directly correlated with obesity, heart disease, diabetes and premature death.

Lust wondered if there has been any push back that cul-de-sacs or neighborhoods with children are safer or more mobile? Henrichsen doesn't believe a cul-de-sac is a bad thing. They can be when they get really long, and it makes the whole block long. An entire neighborhood of cul-de-sacs can be difficult with regard to access.

Beecham questioned if anyone has looked at the locations of schools and parks with regard to walkability. She is more likely to let her kids walk to school if they don't have to cross any busy arterial streets. Henrichsen stated that more recently, LPS looks to build schools more in the middle of the neighborhood. However, since one school serves many neighborhoods, you will ultimately have kids whose path will involve crossing an arterial street. There can be a crossing beneath the street, amongst other ideas. Staff works with Lincoln Public Schools on school sites and routes to school.

Henrichsen continued that how a neighborhood is laid out was identified as a factor in public health. In a more interconnected neighborhood, there are more opportunities to walk. When we look at block length, it is not just people walking around. If you have to travel out to an arterial street to get to the next street over, it increases cars on the arterials. If you have smaller blocks, you have the potential to serve more dwelling units. More right-of-way doesn't necessarily mean less efficient.

This proposal is for an 1,100 foot long block. Staff is trying to balance the people who live in those neighborhoods in the long term and the cost of their daily trips, versus how much the initial costs were in terms of the streets and the long terms costs of maintaining those streets.

Today we have tracked over 210 pedestrian easements across Lincoln. Most are built, some have not been. We have been trying to get them built when the adjacent street gets built. Currently, we have a five foot wide easement with a four foot wide sidewalk and a ten foot setback. You can build a fence in the ten foot setback. The sidewalk is maintained by the adjacent owner. The oldest one is in Woodshire, and dates from 1925. There have been concerns in the past about privacy fence on both sides of an easement.

The proposal is to increase the easement from five feet to fifteen feet to provide more space between the sidewalk and any fence. Some are maintained by an association. Staff is not mandating that these are done by an association. The burden would fall back to the lot owner. Tom Cajka looked at other communities and found a range of easements. A lot of them tied to the block length or block face.

Harris left.

Henrichsen believes that in talking with the development community, they understood there could be merits to this proposal. The next part is clarifying the block length measurement. There was almost universal agreement that it needs to be done. A lot of language in most communities is very vague. The second part about reducing the maximum from 1,320 to 1,100 feet draws the most concern in terms of cost of providing additional roads. Staff would try to address this with the connector street. Currently, we measure block length from one cross street to another. That has been a challenge. It is easy to figure out with rectangular blocks. He thinks the most accurate way to measure block length is measuring all the way around the block and divide by two. Any block over 1,100 you are still going to need a pedestrian easement to help shorten that. The new standard would say the pedestrian easement needs to be fifteen feet wide instead of the five feet wide.

Cornelius questioned if anyone uses block length when block face is more appropriate. Henrichsen replied that some communities count how many intersections are within a subdivision. He believes measuring the perimeter and dividing by two is the best way. He acknowledges there will be some circumstances where blocks need to be longer, for example due to schools, streams or other natural features.

Henrichsen stated that the proposed text changes block lengths to 1,100 feet. In industrial areas, it would not exceed 1,320 feet. He clarified that this will be measured by going along the perimeter and dividing by two. You can count alleys or private lanes if they help reduce the travel distance. Today, if a block is over 1,000 feet, you need a pedestrian easement. Any block over 1,100, you are still going to need a pedestrian easement. Shortening the block from 1,320 to 1,100, there will still be blocks longer than 1,100. You can add a connector street. Staff is proposing this to try and defray initial construction costs.

Another part of the new proposal is for a new connector street that would be 38 foot wide right-of-way and 24 foot wide pavement for two lanes. There would be sidewalk on one side with a ten foot utility easement on the other side. Public Works has agreed to allow a little more of a platform slope. We heard from the private sector that a 24 foot wide street is nice, but it wouldn't reduce the cost all that much. We are trying to limit the length of the connector street to 300 feet long and no more than two in a row. These aren't for commercial collectors or an entrance to the subdivision.

Krout stated that Commissioners should think on this topic and ask staff if there are any questions. He stated that homebuilders and their owners and agents were unanimous in opposing reducing the block length. They see it as something that adds cost and takes the potential for some lots. They were very resistant to this. He felt that staff should bring this discussion to the Commissioners and remind you of the reason for connectivity and walkability.

Hove would like Henrichsen to expand on his previous statement about walkability. Henrichsen replied that it goes back if you look at a neighborhood, there are sidewalks, street trees and destinations, but the amount of distance you have to cover is often quite

long with out and around, long blocks. If you are jogging, you probably don't care. This is encouraging people to walk because the route is shorter. He was also pointing out that with longer blocks, auto travel would be added to every single day. You can improve it by making it easier to walk by having more connections.

Weber questioned if there is a push for developers to go toward more square blocks. Henrichsen believes following topography makes sense. This is more about length. It doesn't have to be a rigid grid pattern.

Beecham asked if there are any other options that cities have used to provide developers more flexibility, but achieve same thing. Henrichsen doesn't believe it is how you measure it. Adding a few more streets, it still reduces the number of lots and adds cost. This is very simply a cost matter. We are trying to weigh the initial construction costs and the long term benefit for the people who will live there.

Lust wanted to know if Public Works is in support of this. It seems this would create more streets to maintain, and we are already short on funds. Henrichsen responded that staff reviewed this with Public Works and they were okay with the proposed standards. They are in favor of encouraging more pedestrian travel. Initial construction of pedestrian easements can be a headache for Public Works to monitor.

Sunderman thinks this is a good idea, but we keep bringing more standards that add more and more cost to the lots. Stormwater was just discussed a few weeks ago. Krout agrees this is not the most thriving time for the home building community.

Lust believes we need to prioritize what we really want from the development community. She would rather see more of the reFORM proposals get pushed forward instead of block lengths. She thinks reFORM is more important.

Beecham questioned if everything existing would be grandfathered in. Henrichsen responded that staff would do that for past ones. The only part that would change is a fence couldn't be built within ten feet. Staff hasn't delved into all the fine details yet.

Weber understands that the homeowners association would be responsible for snow removal. Henrichsen stated that as it is currently drafted, there is an option. If you don't have an association, you don't need to create one. You can maintain it with individual owners.

The briefing was adjourned at 3:40 p.m.