

LINCOLN /LANCASTER COUNTY PLANNING STAFF REPORT
for August 31, 2005 Planning Commission Meeting

P.A.S.: Comprehensive Plan Amendment #05015
Downtown Master Plan

PROPOSAL: The Director of Planning requests to amend the 2025 Lincoln-Lancaster County Comprehensive Plan to adopt the proposed “Downtown Master Plan” as a recognized subarea plan of the City-Comprehensive Plan.

CONCLUSION: The proposed Downtown Master Plan is in conformance with the principles of the 2025 Lincoln-Lancaster County Comprehensive Plan and should be amended into the Comprehensive Plan as an approved subarea plan.

RECOMMENDATION:

Approval

GENERAL INFORMATION:

LOCATION:

“Downtown Lincoln” – This area generally extends from approximately 6th Street on the west to approximately 17th Street on the east, and from approximately H Street on the south to approximately R Street on the north, and includes the “Haymarket District.” The Master Plan also provides land use and development guidance for a portion of the area immediately to the east of Downtown known as “Antelope Valley.”

EXISTING LAND USE:

Significant diversity of existing land uses. The predominate land uses tend to be commercial (i.e., office, retail, services) in character, but the area also contains substantial elements of residential, institutional, governmental, educational, entertainment, parking, open space, and arts/cultural uses.

ASSOCIATED APPLICATIONS: None

HISTORY:

The community’s previous “Master Plan” for the Downtown Lincoln area was adopted by the Lincoln City Council over 30 years ago. This previous Plan – entitled the “Lincoln Center Development Program” – contained a multi-faceted set of development recommendations ranging from broad policy objectives to site specific projects.

The Plan’s 14-point implementation strategy identified nearly 140 potential downtown improvements. Some of the more notable examples include the conversion of the “Old Town District” (a.k.a., “Haymarket”) from an industrial/warehouse area into an entertainment and retail district; the retention of State government offices in the Downtown, including the construction of a new State Office Building; the establishment of a one-way system of streets; the construction of a new performing arts center; the formulation of a program for upgrading streetscape appearance through landscaping and pedestrian-oriented lighting; the creation of an integrated parking program, including the building of the first publicly owned and operated parking structures; the development of a skywalk system to provide elevated weatherproof connections between office and retail activities; the revamping of the City’s public transit services in the Downtown, including an expanded loop route system and provision of a Downtown shuttle service; the development of additional retailing space to support existing retail operations; the reuse of the Old City Hall and Post Office complex; and the first use of “tax increment financing” (TIF) for public improvements. The Plan was instrumental in bringing about significant redevelopment efforts in the Downtown area over the past several decades. The Plan’s success is attributable in part of the community’s willingness and desire to embrace and actively pursue the vision established by the Plan.

COMPREHENSIVE PLAN SPECIFICATIONS:

In the 2025 City-County Comprehensive Plan, the Downtown Lincoln area is recognized as playing a salient role in the long term growth and development of the community. This relationship of Downtown to the overall success of Lincoln receives special acknowledgment as one of only six elements in the Comprehensive Plan’s overall “Vision” statement:

Downtown Lincoln - The Heart of the Community

Downtown Lincoln belongs to all residents of Nebraska because “downtown” is synonymous with the University of Nebraska, state government, and the State capitol Building. This state-wide ownership have strong economic implications, and for that reason, as well as the desire to maintain downtown as the “heartbeat” of the community, the Comprehensive Plan will ensure that downtown remains a special place. The plan will seek to preserve vistas and institutions of cultural importance, to reinforce the district as a center of entertainment, and to promote a rich diversity

of activities and uses, including housing, education, government, offices and commerce.

In the “Future Conditions - Business & Commerce” section of the 2025 Comprehensive Plan the continuing role of Downtown is explicitly spelled out in the following text:

Principles for Downtown

The City should preserve and enhance Downtown’s role as:

- the major office and service emolument center of the City*
- the focus of all levels of government*
- the City’s principal cultural and entertainment center*
- the hotel and convention center for the City*
- the City’s financial center*
- a hub of higher education*
- specialty retail geared toward employees, area residents, convention visitors and University population*

Lincoln’s successful Theater Policy must be maintained and reinforced. New entertainment attractions should be encouraged to locate in the Downtown.

The City’s government center must remain Downtown. All efforts should be made to locate local, state, and federal offices Downtown when expansions and relocations are considered.

Support development and implementation of the Antelope Valley project which is to provide neighborhood revitalization, transportation and transit opportunities and storm water improvements on the east side of Downtown, the UNL campus and surrounding neighborhoods. As the Antelope Valley project progresses, ensure that new development is compatible with the existing Downtown and is pedestrian oriented. Development in the existing and expanded Downtown will maintain the urban environment, including a mix of land uses and residential types. Higher density development with parking areas at the rear of buildings or on upper floors of multi-use parking structures is encouraged.

There are numerous other references in the 2025 Comprehensive Plan to the Downtown area and its continuing function as a key subarea within the community. A sampling of these references are presented below:

Among existing Regional Centers, Downtown Lincoln stands as a unique community resource. Downtown is the county’s most intensive center of activity, offering a broad

mix of retail, office, industrial, residential, and governmental uses. It is home to numerous public facilities – including the Nebraska State Capitol, the University of Nebraska-Lincoln’s main campus, and the County-City Building – as well as private endeavors – including financing, insurance, and other business services. Downtown has historically served as the community’s dominate center of entertainment. A key element to this role have been the long standing and successful “theater policy.” This policy has allowed Downtown to retain an appreciable share of the area’s movie theaters. It is intended that this policy would continued as part of the present Plan.

Encourage a variety of housing types in the Downtown and Antelope Valley area.

These districts attract large numbers of pedestrians on a regular basis. They include the Downtown (along with the main campus of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln), University Place, College View, and Havelock. Pedestrian level of service standards in these areas should be high. These areas should have direct, continuous sidewalks with safe street crossings. Visual interest and amenities should serve to attract people to these districts.

Strategies – Bicycles in the Downtown:

- Develop and implement a Downtown Bicycles Facilities Plan. This Plan shall include north-south and east-west bicycle lanes. Identify and Develop at least one north-south and one east-west corridor to pilot dedicated bike lanes within one year of the Downtown Bicycle Facilities Plan approval.*
- Work with the Downtown Lincoln Association, the Lincoln Public Works and Utilities Department, the Lincoln Parks and Recreation Department, and other agencies interested in the creation of a Downtown Bicycle Facilities Plan.*

Strategies – Balances Transit System

- Consider transit service supporting the Comprehensive Plan’s Vision of Downtown as a diverse center of activity. Such transit service should aid within the Downtown and further the Downtown’s role as an entertainment center.*

Travel between Lincoln and regional destinations (such as the Omaha metropolitan area) will increase during the planning period. The travel will include routine commuter trips as well as discretionary travel. . . .Planning and improvements might be considered to help promote and support the possibility of commuter rail for Lincoln beyond 2025. These strategies might include a multi-modal center in the Downtown area with immediate access to the existing rail service.

Downtown is the heart of our community, and strong community facilities are essential to maintaining Downtown vitality. The main library should remain Downtown, where it is pedestrian and transit accessible, serving and linking Downtown's housing, education, government, offices and commerce communities. Keeping the main library Downtown is important not only for downtown but for the surrounding historic neighborhoods and the city as a whole. Any future renovation and/or relocation plans must involve sites that maintain pedestrian and mass transit accessibility and continue the main library's role as a core community facility in traditional geographic Downtown.

ANALYSIS:

1. The purpose of the "Downtown Master Plan" is to depict in text and images a blueprint for ensuring the sustained economic, physical, and cultural vitality of Downtown Lincoln. The Plan contains a series of recommendations for maintaining and enhancing residential, retail, office, service, entertainment, public/governmental, transportation, and other uses and activities in the Downtown. The Plan recognizes the strong architectural and cultural heritage of the Downtown area and of the need to preserve its integrity for future generations. At the same time, the Plan sets forth development and redevelopment opportunities to ensure the area remains current with the community's evolving growth and development demands.
2. The Master Plan is designed to address Downtown's development potential for a period of approximately 25 to 30 years. The Plan lays out both near term "catalyst projects" – that call for immediate action – and significantly longer term efforts that will take years to bring to fruition. The Plan presents an overall vision of Downtown's relationship to the broader Lincoln community in a fashion paralleling the image painted in the adopted 2025 Comprehensive Plan.
3. The Master Plan was developed over a period of approximately one year, with the study effort beginning in the summer of 2004. During this time, four community workshops were held in the Downtown – each involved several hundred citizens. These events were designed to elicit the community's thoughts and ideas on how to guide Downtown's future. During the course of the study, staff also conducted dozens of presentations to local business, neighborhood, and community groups to solicit their vision regarding Downtown.
4. The Plan's preparation was overseen by the "Downtown Action Team" (DAT.) This group was appointed by Lincoln Mayor Seng specifically for this study. The DAT was composed of 22 local area citizens representing a diversity of private, public, and not-for-profit concerns in and around the Downtown area. Staff support for the study was provided by the City-County Planning Department, Lincoln Urban Development

Department, and the Downtown Lincoln Association. Professional consultant services were also employed during the study to provide crucial land use and transportation planning, market analysis, urban design, and implementation guidance.

5. The Master Plan's broadly based vision for Downtown reflects the unique and diverse character of the area and its environs. The Plan is intended to serve as a guide for continuing private and public sector endeavors and to provide a basis for reviewing future development proposals – both private and public. The vision of the Downtown area as expressed in the Plan includes the following:

! **Strengthening Private/Public Relationships:** Successful development in downtown areas necessitate a close working relationship between the private and public sectors. This is especially the case in Lincoln because of the traditional balance between private and private sector uses – particularly with the strong presence of State, Federal and local government facilities in the Downtown. Strengthen the private/public relationship is a primary goal of the Master Plan to ensure the long term success of the Plan's proposed projects and policies.

! **Retaining and Expanding Retailing Opportunities:** The presence of sustainable, diverse, and quality retailing is vital to making Downtown appealing to workers, residents, and visitors. The objective expressed in the Master Plan is to pursue a course which protects the viability of existing retail operations while seeking to expand opportunities for new retail. The market research analysis completed for the Master Plan study indicated a potential for about 600,000 sq. ft. of additional retailing capacity over the next twenty years – this projection is in addition to existing retail operations in the Downtown. A linchpin of the Plan's retailing strategy is fostering the development of additional retail capacity along the P Street corridor. The recommended strategy will serve to create an attractive retail experience for Downtown shoppers as well as link the core Downtown with the Haymarket District, with its existing complement of shops, restaurants, and cultural attractions.

! **Expanding Residential Choices:** Growth in Downtown's housing market has been extremely positive over the last several years. Research conducted for the Master Plan study indicates a continuation of this affirmative housing market with a projected absorption of around 2,000 units over the next two decades. With this expanding Downtown residential market there is also the need to provide greater diversify in housing stock so that the needs of renters and owners can both be met.

! **Sustaining Architectural and Historic Character:** Lincoln's Downtown has a long and storied architectural legacy, accentuated by the world-renowned

State Capitol Building designed by New York Architect Bertram Grosvenor Goodhue. The Master Plan embraces the goal of affirming and furthering the historic character of Downtown buildings and structures by ensuring their long term economic and functional viability. The Master Plan calls for a sensitivity to the architectural history in the Downtown as the area evolves to meet current and future development requirements. This includes acknowledging the role of existing public commissions, adopted plans, and design standards governing the evolving architectural character of Downtown.

- ! **Expanding and Efficiently Managing Public Parking Services:** Parking plays a critical role in attracting and keeping Downtown development viable. The supply, location, pricing, and management of public parking – off- and on-street – are all central to the “parking experience” of Downtown workers, visitors, and residents. The Plan recognizes the importance of parking to all who use Downtown and offers recommendations on ensuring its place in the future of the area.

- ! **Contribute to Community’s Economic and Jobs Expansion:** Downtown is one of the community’s primary generators of economic vitality. The Downtown is home to thousands of employees each work day and is an attractive location for businesses seeking opportunities for personal and commercial interaction in an urban-style environment. The presence of State government, the University of Nebraska, Federal Courts and other governmental, institutional, and educational entities furthers this economic foundation. The Plan foresees expanding opportunities for job growth in the office and service sectors.

- ! **Create Active Civic/Public Spaces:** Downtown furnishes a variety of existing open space venues which are enjoyed by Downtown employees, residents, and patrons. With projected increases in employment, residential units, shopping, services, and entertainment in the Downtown, the virtue of additional civic and public space will be magnified. The Plan sees multiple opportunities for enhancing the Downtown’s public spaces through the creation of a Civic Square at 13th and P Streets, linear green ways manifested through “promenades” along public rights-of-way, and planned and newly proposed recreational spaces flanking the Downtown.

- ! **Affirm Education, Cultural and Entertainment Contribution:** Downtown is home to a diverse complement of educational, cultural, and entertainment venues. On Downtown’s northern doorstep resides the University of Nebraska-Lincoln’s flagship campus, which offers a world-class higher education experience. UNL provides a deep stock of cultural opportunities, not only for their thousands of students, instructors and support staff but also for the

broader community. Movie theaters, live performing arts events, art galleries, museums, and other cultural and entertainment activities are routinely held in Downtown Lincoln. The Master Plan presents strategies for encouraging the continuance and expansion of such events by maintaining key policies and identifying venues for holding these activities and by bolstering the visibility and attractiveness to all members of the Lincoln community. This includes siting areas for festival events, retaining high-quality library services in the Downtown, support the continuation and enhancement of existing museums (e.g., Children's Museum and Nebraska State History Museum), and pursuing convention, conference, and sports venues that further the interests of the entire community.

- ! **Attract Visitors and Tourists:** Visitors to Lincoln contribute millions of dollars each year to the local economy. Tourism is an important economic force which needs to be aggressively pursued and actively supported. Downtown Lincoln offers the greatest single concentration and diversity of tourist attractions in the entire county. The existing concentration of hotel and convention space in the Downtown aid to this economic vitality. The Master Plan sets a vision that calls for support from across the Lincoln community to retain the existing investment in these tourist attractions and supporting facilities, as well as logically and systematically expanding the attractions in order to capture large portions of this travel regional market for the benefit of the city and county as a whole.

- ! **Respect Adjacent Districts:** Downtown Lincoln is not an island. While it has traditionally recognized edges, Downtown Lincoln's land uses blend into the residential, commercial, industrial, and institutional zones which skirt its flanks. A healthy, positive symbiotic relationship between the Downtown and its neighbors is critical to the long term viability of all these areas. The Master Plan recognizes the importance of these relationships and offers development strategies for managing their long term success. Of particular note, the study process took care to address the development relationship between Downtown and the Antelope Valley project area to the east. Antelope Valley stands as one of Lincoln's largest public infrastructure and redevelopment efforts of all time. It will significantly reduce the breadth of the Antelope Creek floodplain as it approaches Salt Creek and will open up new development opportunities along Antelope Creek. The project also involves the construction of a major network of arterial streets across the center of the community. The Downtown Master Plan represents the balancing of land uses and development densities between the two areas, most notable for the area east of 17th Street running to Antelope Creek.

- ! **Further Transportation Opportunities for the Downtown:** Well planned and operated transportation systems to, from, through, and within a downtown

are an important part of what makes urban cores successful. The Master Plan process examined a number of non-traditional transportation and mobility concerns for Downtown Lincoln including pedestrian movement, public transportation, and bicycle facility needs. The final Plan contains recommendations regarding the near-term installation of on-street bicycle lanes, pedestrian enhancements, and a revamping of downtown transit shuttle services. These improvements are intended to balance the respective contributions of these various modes with the omnipresent automobile. These recommendations seek to advance pedestrian and bicyclist safety, create a more pedestrian/bicycle friendly environment, and actualize a mobility paradigm consistent with the character of an urban core.

- !** **Promote Desirable Urban Design:** While not a part of the Master Plan document, the Plan’s study process crafted a set of Downtown “Designed Guidelines” intended to aid the Plan’s implementation. These guidelines look at the more detailed physical manifestation of the Plan’s vision by addressing the character of the Downtown (including its historical and architectural legacy), pedestrian orientation (including streetscape and outdoor spaces), architectural integrity, lighting objectives, and signage guideposts.
6. The Master Plan includes basic, long term guidance for making land use development decisions. The Plan’s “Land Use Framework” casts a broad image of how the Downtown could develop over the next several decades to achieve the vision presented in the Plan. This Land Use Framework is intended to give overall guidance to the community on how Downtown should develop – it is not intended to be prescriptive but rather descriptive in nature. It is understood that events will occur over the life-span of the Master Plan which moderate, alter, or redirect certain development objectives and concepts embodied in the Plan. This built-in flexibility is highly desirable in that it allows for unanticipated events (i.e., be they matters of timing, location, development intensity, infrastructure improvements, etc.) to unfold and take hold within an overall planning framework and implementation process.
 7. The Downtown Master Plan respects and recognizes the planning endeavors – past and present – which consider or govern development within subregions of the Downtown. Such standing groups – i.e., the Nebraska Capitol Environs Commission, the Urban Design Committee, and Historic Preservation Commission – are key players in setting the future for Downtown. These groups and their work are considered integral to the implementation process and must be fully engaged by staff and the community as the Master Plan’s implementation moves forward.
 8. Simply put, the successful implementation of the Master Plan will require earnest leadership, the community’s commitment and dedication to the Plan’s vision, diligence on the part of stakeholders and staff, cooperation among the many participants, and,

inevitably, money. The Master Plan charts the organizational responsibilities for seeking the Plan's implementation. This includes a listing of key players and their tasks for bringing the Plan into reality. An inventory of potential funding sources is also identified in the Plan. This inventory recognizes that innovative and creative thought will be required to assemble the correct balance of public and private sector funding needed to bring about the community's vision for Downtown.

9. A series of "Catalyst Projects" are detailed in the Plan's implementation section for early development. These seven projects embody the initial spirit required to effectively launch the implementation process. The projects include a diverse set of public and private sector initiatives that begin to lay the foundation for projects which could logically follow. The Catalyst Projects include potential public/civic space at 13th and P Streets, along with the development of a mixed used facility involving decked parking, retail, hotel, and/or residential uses. Some of the Catalyst Projects are modest in scale and will move quickly, while others are more formidable and will require some period of time to bring about.

CONCLUSION:

Downtown remains a key determinant in defining the quality of Lincoln's economic, social, educational, cultural, and development future expressed in the 2025 City-County Comprehensive Plan. Within this context, the Downtown Master Plan effectively articulates the goals and policy objectives contained in the adopted Comprehensive Plan.

The Master Plan provides applicable guidance for the continued planning and on-going development processes for the Downtown area and the community as a whole. Moreover, the Master Plan lends meaningful and sufficient direction for crafting implementation programs by city departments.

The Master Plan's programmatic and policy details need to be further integrated with the concepts, visions, and approaches contained in the Comprehensive Plan and other adopted planning and documents. This integration will take time and thoughtful design. Moreover, additional studies and program assessments will likely need to occur to refine and unfurl the concepts embedded in the Downtown Master Plan. These may include the analysis of selected issues dealing with transportation (i.e., new and/or improved streets, public transit services, parking supply and management, pedestrian enhancements, multi-modal facilities, etc.), evolving retail market segments, growth in housing demand, and other applicable Downtown land uses.

All in all, the community has an opportunity through the Master Plan to craft a distinctive and unique subarea that supports Lincoln's broader growth objectives. The Master Plan's vision for the Downtown includes a robust mix of residential, retail, office, service, entertainment,

educational, public, open space, and other uses that is appropriately scaled for the subarea and for the regional marketplace.

RECOMMENDATION:

Amend the 2025 Lincoln-Lancaster County Comprehensive Plan as follows:

1. Amend the “On-Going Comprehensive Plan Activities”, section on page F 156 to add the following Plan to the list of approved subarea plans.
 - Downtown Master Plan, 2005

Prepared by:

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DATE: August 24, 2005

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