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Introduction and Purpose
With the advent of the biannual budget process the Planning Department has elected to make use of the time that would have been spent on the Capital Improvement Program and budgeting and use that time to undergo a self assessment process. The purpose of this process is to reach out to the public and our customers, both internal and external, as well as boards and committees staffed by the Planning Department and to gather input on the perceptions of planning practice in Lincoln and Lancaster County as well as the customer service provided by the Planning Department.

The purpose of the self assessment process was to more fully explore two basic questions: “How effective is the planning process in Lincoln and Lancaster County?” and “How effective is the Lincoln and Lancaster County Planning Department?” This report will attempt to identify some areas of success, areas for improvement, and some specific actions steps for the coming months and years.

Process
The self assessment process began with a community survey posted online and in five Lincoln Libraries in hard copy format. The survey looked at seven planning topics and three to seven issues within those topics. Two basic questions were asked: “How important are each of these issues in creating and maintaining the kind of community in which you would like to live?” and “How well do you think Lincoln and Lancaster County are doing in addressing these issues?” In addition respondents were asked whether or not they had previous contact with the Planning Department and what type of contact they had and asked to assess the contact experience. Results from the survey are reported in the Planning Assessment Survey Report (Appendix 1).

The survey was used to gather information, but also to generate interest in planning topics and identify those who may be willing to serve on focus groups. Those who volunteered were divided into categories based on descriptors they used in the survey. Four groups were formed: Development professionals, Business owners and other professionals, and two Neighborhood/Homeowners Associations and Interested Citizens. Dates were selected, invitations sent and between 9 and 13 individuals indicated they would attend each of the meetings. These meetings were conducted and the results are in the Focus Group Results section of this report.

In addition, focus groups were conducted with the commissions and committees staffed by the Planning Department. These include City and County Boards of Zoning Appeals (BZAs), Historic Preservation Commission, Urban Design Committee, Nebraska Capitol Environ Commission, and the County Ecological Advisory Committee. Two groups of City and County staff participated in focus group conversations as well, with one group concentrating on Development Review processes and the other on Long Range processes. The results from these meeting are also in the Focus Group Results section of this report.
Survey

Topic areas of Landuse, Downtown, Housing, Attractiveness, Community Character, Natural Resources, and Transportation and Mobility were developed, with issues in each area identified. Respondents were asked to first consider “How important are each of these issues in creating and maintaining the kind of community in which you would like to live?” to which they responded using a five point scale with 1 being the “lowest importance” and 5 being the “highest importance”. Next, respondents were asked to consider “How well do you think Lincoln and Lancaster County are doing in addressing these issues?” to which they responded using a five point scale with 1 being “very poor” and 5 being “very well”. In addition, respondents were given the opportunity to include text comments for each of the topic areas. A full text of the textual responses is included at the end of Planning Assessment Survey Report as Appendix A, and a copy of the survey as Appendix B.

Responses were solicited through a newspaper article, drop boxes in five City Libraries, Planning Department email list, email addresses gleaned from records of applicants, owners and developers in the Planning Department application tracking system, and on the Planning Department website. There were 457 total responses to the survey, 19 through the City Libraries system and 438 through the online survey. Questions in the two surveys were identical.

While the survey is not intended to be a scientific polling of the public, the responses provided anecdotal information to the Planning Department on the perceived importance of various planning factors as well to provide a framework for further conversation in focus group meetings.

The results of the survey are fully discussed in the Planning Assessment Survey Report, however in general the responses averaged scores that were higher for the questions of “How important is it?” and lower for “How are we doing?” on each issue. There were only three negative average scores (scores below 3.0) all on the question of “How are we doing?” Housing Affordability Downtown, Attractiveness of Industrial Areas, and Transit Services. Of those three, Attractiveness of Industrial Areas also ranked relatively low on the question of “How important is it?” while Transit Services received a score of relatively high importance.

In addition to the questions on planning topics, four questions regarding contact with the Planning Department were asked. Those who indicated they had previous contact with the Planning Department were asked to indicate what type of contact they had and the responses were sorted according to the type of contact. These results are also reported in the Planning Assessment Survey Report.

Focus Groups

Focus groups were chose as an evaluation tool because they allow more in depth discussion and the ability to ask probing and clarifying questions during the session. While surveys are more easily used to gather large numbers of responses, a focus group allows the interviewer to clarify questions, evaluate body language and follow up on potentially interesting lines of discussion.
Three different types of focus groups were used in this evaluation. First, public focus groups made up of those who volunteered as part of the above described survey process. Second, boards and committees staffed by Planning Department staff. And finally, County, City, and school staff that Planning works with on a regular basis.

**Public Focus Groups**

Participants in the survey were asked whether or not they would be interested in participating in a more focused conversation on planning issues and the Planning Department. Those who were interested were directed to a webpage where they could register. As part of the registration process, volunteers were asked to select from a short list those characteristics they felt identified them. The characteristics were:

- Member of Neighborhood or Homeowners Association
- Development and Building Industry Professional
- Land Use Attorney/Engineers
- Student
- Interested Citizen
- Business Owner or Professional
- City or County Employee
- Racial or Ethnic Minority
- Low to Moderate Income

Registrations were separated according to the characteristics. Groups were formed using the following methodology.

1. City and County Employees were removed if they were to be included in a future focus group (see following section).

2. “Student”, “Racial or Ethnic Minority”, and “Low to Moderate Income” were noted as special categories. Every effort was made to ensure these individuals were represented in each of the groups following.

3. Groups were made for Development and Building Industry Professional, Land Use Attorney/Engineers, Business Owner or Professional, Member of Neighborhood or Homeowners Association, and Interested Citizen. Those who put themselves in more than one of these groups were initially shown in both.

Because there was so much overlap between Member of Neighborhood or Homeowners Association and Interested Citizen these two were consolidated into a single group with the thought that we would likely hold more than one session. This group ended up with approximately 60 names.
Because there were so few in the Development and Building Industry Professional and Land Use Attorney/Engineer groups these were likewise consolidated into a single group and anyone who listed in either of these was kept in that group alone. There were approximately 20 names on this list.

Anyone remaining who listed themselves as Business Owner or Professional was kept in that group alone. This list was approximately 30 names long.

(Anyone who did not list themselves as one of these three groups was placed in the Member of Neighborhood or Homeowners Association and Interested Citizen group.)

4. The result was 3 major groups: the Development and Building Industry Professional and Land Use Attorney/Engineers group (Developers); the Member of Neighborhood or Homeowners Association and Interested Citizen group (NA/HA); and the Business Owner or Professional group (Business).

Once the lists were compiled, invitations were sent to each group with specific dates and times as well as further information about what to expect of the activity. The NA/HA group was given a choice of two dates. As RSVPs were received names were listed and NA/HA members were separated into the two separate dates. All meetings were held in the evening between 6 and 8 pm at the Jane Snyder Trail Center. The four groups were each made up of between 8 and 14 individuals, although not all who accepted actually attended. Invitations are attached as Appendix 2.

**Narrative Summaries**

**Development Group**

The April 30th focus group included five volunteers who identified themselves as “Development and Land Use Professionals” on the registration survey. These included two builder/developers, an architect, a land use attorney and a financial professional.

They all expressed the opinion that Lincoln is a city whose size makes it feel like a small town, but still allows a wide range of opportunities. The low cost of living and well educated work force with strong work ethic and ability to adapt were cited as advantages. It was noted that there are many people who are over-qualified for the jobs they are currently in which means when a new business comes to town there are plenty quality employees to choose from. The level of investment in the school system and the downtown were specifically mentioned as factors leading to a vibrant community. The stable economy with a strong small-business community, the presence of the university and state government, and diversity of employment were seen as positives.

There were, however, problems noted, specifically impact fees and their effect on affordable housing. Although there are rebates available for affordable housing projects it is difficult to go through the qualification project for those rebates. A lack of affordable housing has a detrimental effect on some industries that rely on low skill workers. There were also difficulties expressed in the supply of available
Focus Groups. When new lots are final platted the taxes rise to a higher level which means developers generally only final plat lots when they know they have buyers. In addition, many banks want to see a percentage of lots “pre-sold” before they will loan money to complete improvements.

When asked to specifically comment on changes in the Planning Department the volunteers expressed appreciation for the progress that has been made in creating a more predictable process. The increased number of applications possible through the administrative process was helpful as was the overall cooperative attitude of the department staff. Changes to the sidewalk escrow process were specifically mentioned as a plus. The Planning Department is seen as helpful, particularly since the new development review manager took over. There has been a cultural shift within Planning that they would like to see in other departments, particularly Building and Safety and Public Works and Utilities.

However, the Planning Department should not pretend to know what sells and should be more open to increased “character” in streets, flexibility with sidewalks, cul-de-sacs, and narrower street to discourage speeding. The siting of schools in the middle of neighborhoods causes a large amount of traffic moving in and out of the neighborhood. In general the participants feel there is an unfair balance between government and developers in terms of requirements on projects.

With regard to the Comprehensive Plan goal of increased infill and redevelopment, the group was generally supportive of the concept; however they acknowledged there were challenges. At present there are many projects being developed in the existing city, but these may represent the “low-hanging fruit”. Further redevelopment and infill should be led by the City – designating redevelopment areas and engaging the public in the process in order to promote redevelopment and infill. In some cases it may mean that some residential properties may have to be removed to make way for commercial. The City should have the political will to use eminent domain when required to make a project happen. There should also be an investigation of other tools besides blighting an area. Residential TIF should be considered, perhaps on a shorter term.

**Business Group**

The May 2 Focus Group was made up of those who identified themselves as Business Owners and Professionals on the registration survey. There were 7 attendees who identified themselves as being from various businesses including private non-profit work, real estate, software, and salvage.

When describing what they liked about Lincoln the group identified the size of the town and the presence of state government and the University. They felt business and economic opportunities were becoming stronger and there are more young professionals wanting to stay in and move to Lincoln. The excellent schools and single school district contributed to a feeling of community. The trail system and the fact that the City is easy to navigate are pluses. There is a feeling of community, strong neighborhoods, and the availability of cultural and entertainment opportunities are also strengths.

Lincoln was seen as a good place to do business because of the stable economy and job market. The economy does not cycle through boom and bust cycles like many other places. Housing prices are generally stable. There seems to be more venture capital coming available with more opportunities for financing. The increasing size and opportunities for success build on themselves. The University and the
Focus Groups

colleges provide a well educated work force and an entrepreneurial spirit. There have been an increasing number of new industries. There is low unemployment but still easy to find hard working, well-qualified employees.

There is a lot of support for small businesses and non-profits in the community, including the support of LIBA which fills a gap the Chamber has left. There is a healthy amount of competition, but overall there is more collaboration than competition.

Changes projected included increasing collaboration with Omaha as the two become more of a metropolis. Downtown will need to evolve to serve more than just a student population. It will be important to try to maintain the sense of community as the City gets larger. The City will become more diverse which brings mostly good things but have to make sure to keep the one City feel. It will be important to foster new industries and to continue to build public/private partnerships. The public schools are great and are an attractor for those who might consider relocating to Lincoln.

As this change happens it is important to create an atmosphere that attracts entrepreneurs and encourages healthy competition between businesses. Lincoln has always taken a little longer to incubate business but is starting to pick up and success breeds success.

The balance between government control and overregulation is delicate. Right now it is going well, but it will be important to continue to keep the public and business communities involved and monitor the effect of control on business. It is important to keep the government as lean as possible to keep taxes low, however as we grow staff will have to be added to provide the level of service desired (police). But property taxes are not always enough to support growth. City needs to keep thinking “out of the box” to come up with creative ways to provide services.

The City should work to encourage development in each area of the City. “Pre-planning” redevelopment will help get the neighborhood to buy in and make the process easier for the developer. Government’s role should be to “set things up and then get out of the way”. Public transit, historic preservation, and new athletic facilities were also discussed, specifically an aquatics center, as important for social and economic stability.

NA/HA Group 1

The May 7 focus group was made up of 6 volunteers ranging from a new graduate to two recent retirees. All identified themselves on the survey as being members of a Neighborhood/Homeowners Association or Interested Citizens.

This group also mentioned the size of Lincoln as one of the things they liked best, as well as trails, green spaces and the strong sense of community. The City is clean, good for biking, and has good schools. The slower pace of life and the friendliness of the people was important as well as the desire to be involved in the community. There is a wide variety of things to do including the zoo and museums. The architecture is interesting, although more could be done to preserve older homes. Neighborhoods have unique identities although there aren’t the interesting ethnic neighborhoods one sometimes sees in
larger cities. This may be because immigrants are so quickly integrated into the community there is not the desire to separate into specific neighborhoods.

Development seems to have really picked up over the last 5 – 10 years. The private sector will always have the money, so it will always be important to foster public/private partnerships. There is a growing entrepreneurial climate in the City. There is a feeling that some of the zoning and subdivision rules are too restrictive. Lincoln has to either decide to loosen the reigns and let development happen or tighten and stay small. There was a feeling that we are at a tipping point. Sometimes a small group of vocal opponents can mess up a project. Need to use the media more to reach that “silent majority” who supports many of these projects.

There is a need to support local shops and businesses and keep Lincoln “Lincoln”. We could focus events in certain areas to bring people into that neighborhood. Need to keep small neighborhood commercial areas alive. It is difficult to redevelop these areas because of neighborhood opposition. The quality and number of rental units is important to maintain a strong neighborhood. More involvement by the neighborhood association can help with problem properties.

It can be difficult to get information from the City and to get information to neighborhood residents, especially renters. Would like to have some sort of registration system with the City where someone could sign up for information about their neighborhood. The City should continue to try and use every method to get information out possible. If the neighborhoods are kept strong the City will be strong. In general people don’t understand what the Planning Department does. It’s important to make connections between the taxes people pay and the services they receive.

**NA/HA Group 2**
The May 14 focus group was made up of 11 volunteers who identified themselves on the registration survey as being members of a Neighborhood/Homeowners Association or Interested Citizens. The group was made up of a good mixture of ages and experience level, with a couple former Planning Commissioners and a couple of graduate students.

Comments regarding reasons for liking Lincoln included safety and a good place to raise kids with good schools and great trails. There is a strong sense of community and people that care about one another and are active in their community. There are pockets of the community that are suffering, but no real ghetto and a good amount of resources for those who do need help. The community has a small town feel but is still large enough to have all of the activities and services one would need. It is clean with lots of green areas. Traffic is not bad and it is possible to live without a car. The diversity of the community has been increasing. The community takes pride in planning for the future.

Things that this group thinks are lacking are more cultural events, better public transit and possibly light rail, more walkable neighborhoods, and more variety in small businesses. It will be important to discourage sprawl and leapfrog development and to make the most of the natural areas we do have. It will also be important to insure variety in the downtown and Haymarket, including a grocery store and more variety in residential, so it doesn’t just turn in to bars and restaurants.
The problem of making Lincoln attractive to young people was discussed. **Walkable communities** and a desire to *live in more urbanized areas* were discussed. The younger members of the group said it was difficult to find jobs that they were qualified for, or perhaps more accurately, not over-qualified for. There was also a lack of a “scene” for young people. However both felt Lincoln was moving in a very exciting direction that young people were going to find much more attractive. It is also difficult to get young families and renters involved in community conversations. The time constraints of families make attending public meetings difficult. The City was encouraged to *continue to use a wide variety of methods for gaining public input*.

There was a feeling that there was an *increasing age and income separation* in the City with most rental housing that was affordable becoming more and more rundown while newer rentals were in large complexes and too expensive. **Live work units and “granny flats”** would help to increase the types of affordable housing. Generally, the City has done a good job of investing not just in new but also in existing areas.

*Congestion in the City is not bad*, but will increase. **Public transportation, sidewalk improvements**, and **bike facilities** will be important as it gets more difficult to drive. The **public schools** were mentioned as one of the great assets of the City, as were **parks and trails**. The City is encouraged to continue to *preserve green space along streams and trails*.

**Major Findings from Public Groups**

In general participants are very pleased with Lincoln and Lancaster County. The positive qualities most often mentioned were the small town feel and close knit community, the strong neighborhoods, availability of goods and services, trail system, public school system, and the development of downtown. Negatives most often mentioned were affordability of housing and increasing divide between “haves” and “have-nots”, diversity of housing and availability of services in the downtown area, retention of young and “creative” professionals, walkability, public transit services, and over-regulation.

All groups expressed the opinion that Lincoln was at some sort of a turning point. The development downtown indicated to them that Lincoln is at a critical point where it is changing from a small town to a large city. Some saw this as a time of opportunity and something that would lead to attraction of more young professionals and new industries. Other see it as a matter of concern and worry that the small town community feel they enjoy will change. Most of the participants felt that Lincoln was doing a good job of balancing the public-private interests and the government regulation – free market interests at this time but felt it was important to constantly monitor this balance.

**Planning Staffed Boards and Committees**

**Narrative Summaries**

*City and County Boards of Zoning Appeals*

The City and County Boards of Zoning Appeals met for a joint meeting on April 12, 2013. As part of that meeting the boards participated in the focus group conversation.
One member pointed out that although nationally development has been slow; there has never been more development energy in downtown Lincoln.

The boards see their role as granting exceptions to the rules to provide for fairness. They feel the lack of applications is evidence that the rules are fair. Most of the time, the staff in Building and Safety solve most of the problems before they get to the BZA. Because of this work the public comes to the meetings better educated and with a better understanding of the process. However, some said the lack of applications may also be a reflection of how the process is cumbersome and daunting.

The boards felt the role of the Planning Department was to provide guidance and that this was being done well. They felt the process was about as streamlined as it could get.

**County Ecological Advisory Committee**

The County Ecological Advisory Committee (CEAC) is a group citizens appointed by the County Board to advise on environmental issues in the County. The group is made up of current and retired professionals and others with extensive experience in ecological issues. The CEAC meets monthly on the first Tuesday of the month at 7 am, unless no agenda items have been identified. The focus group conversation took place at the regular May 7th meeting of the CEAC.

In general the group feels the development in the county has dropped off in recent years and more development seems to be occurring in the City. The City edge remains well defined. It seems there have been a lot of housing starts in the past 6 months and it may be that some of the developments are filling up and there may be more new developments coming in soon. It seems like there are more options for different types of housing.

The changes in downtown are welcome. There are increased options for downtown living, however still a need for more midrange and affordable housing downtown. As downtown becomes more residential and the city in general becomes denser it will be important to provide green space downtown and informal open space and green corridors in general. This is particularly important for children to be able to experience nature. Community garden space should continue to expand with demand.

The CEAC sees their role as one of consulting on various issues. In the past they have done environmental reviews on acreage development and reviewed utility plans (LES). They have also been active in long range planning such as the revision of the Comprehensive Plan, LRTP review, and Prairie Corridor assessment. They see the role of the Planning Department as coordinating information, bringing issues to them at the proper time, and providing information and examples from other cities to help in making recommendations for Lincoln and Lancaster County. There is a constant need to educate the public on issues of natural, cultural and historic resources in the County.

A few ideas for future activities for the CEAC were discussed:

* Prairie quality rating system and recognition of those who have made efforts to preserve their prairies
* Use aerials to review native grass in the County
Focus Groups

Possible survey of CEAC issue

Urban Design Committee
The Urban Design Committee (UDC) is a group of 7 appointed members who review applications in areas where design standards are in place. The focus group discussion was held during the regular May 8th meeting.

The UDC sees a lot of energy in downtown development and increased diversity in development in general. Neighborhood revitalization projects around the downtown core and the restoration of older homes was seen as a positive. The Arena, Antelope Valley, UNL Master Plan, changes near East Campus, Fallbrook and Village Gardens were all specifically mentioned as new and exciting projects. It seemed to the UDC that the private sector has begun to buy in to the development of Lincoln and is more willing to partner in projects, so that the government is not driving the process as much as it may have in the past.

The UDC sees their role in this process as one of review and advice. They attempt to bring their expertise to the table and help to raise the bar on projects, hopefully making them even better. They also act as an appeal board in some cases. They do feel that they are most relevant in their advisory capacity and that when it comes to approving projects they are less clear on their role, particularly when they are in combined meetings with the Historic Preservation Committee. They wondered if it was good to meet jointly. They would like to have a clear description of procedures when meeting jointly. They would also like to make sure the question being asked is stated clearly to each of the committees during the voting process, and also provide verification of what each committee approved.

This group has a great sense of responsibility because the public has a stake in most of these projects. It is easy to get information to the UDC on public projects but many times on private projects there are confidentiality problems. It is important to the committee that they get projects as early in the process as possible to ensure they have adequate time to review. It is preferable that the design architect (when one is involved) be present at the review meetings. The suggestion was made that perhaps a pre-conference or a sort of “president + 1” meeting might be offered to the Mayor when these private projects come in and are still at the confidential stage. That way the Mayor might be able to get the benefit of UDC input but still protect the interests of the developer.

Historic Preservation Commission
The Historic Preservation Commission (HPC) is a group of 7 appointed members with expertise in development design and history. They have responsibility for review of development in historic districts and work to identify and preserve the unique historic and cultural assets of the community.

The HPC feels there is an increased value placed on historic resources in the City. They feel the public is beginning to understand the value added to a neighborhood or individual property when the historic features are preserved. The development seen in the Haymarket District and the increased value of many homes in the historic neighborhoods are evidence of the value added. More generally, the group
noted the many avenues for public involvement in the community through neighborhood associations, boards and committees, public hearings and open houses, etc... They feel this increases the investment an individual has in the community.

On the positive side, the planning process in general is a positive for the community. Trails are one of the greatest assets the community has and they appreciate the plans for continuing improvement. Nebraska’s status as a public power state is valuable and should be touted more. On the negative, the O Street corridor seems particularly neglected as far as street trees and sidewalks go. This is the street most out of town people know and should receive extra attention to make it more welcoming and attractive. Street tree and sidewalk maintenance, the downtown bike lanes and the disconnect between home owners and businesses were also mentioned as negatives.

The role of the HPC is seen as enlightening and redirecting applicants in a way that might lead to projects with more long term value: more of a role of “Place-keeping” than “Place-making”. They are very happy with the staff assistance they receive from Planning. They also feel that there is a good balance in their role and powers. It would be easier for them if they had more power to mandate, but the rules are flexible enough that they have the ability to work with the applicants and most often come up with a fair compromise. They feel the purpose of the ordinance is to help create a sense of community rather than strict regulation.

**Nebraska Capitol Environs Commission**

The Nebraska Capitol Environs Commission is a group of 7 members appointed by the City and State empowered to protect and advocate for improvements to the setting of the Nebraska State Capitol. The focus group with this commission was held during the regular meeting of May 23rd, 2013, with 5 members in attendance.

Overall, the group felt the development climate is very positive in Lincoln, particularly in the downtown and that the areas surrounding downtown are probably prime for redevelopment. This group seemed to see disparity between the core of the City and its suburban areas. The general opinion was that the suburban areas lack a unified identity and sense of place. Materials and design are not of high quality. There could be more attention to these areas. This could possibly be due to all of the activity currently in downtown. Design standards and some additional attention to the suburban areas are needed.

The group is very pleased with the staffing provided by Planning and the State. They felt it may be time to add urban design staff to the City and to become more active in implementing the urban design goals of the Comprehensive Plan. They encourage the Planning Department to work with investors and in other public/private partnerships to accomplish these goals.

**Planning Commission**

The Planning Commission is a group of 9 volunteers appointed by the Mayor with the concurrence of the County Board and City Council. They are charged by State and local law with advising the City Council and County Board on a variety of planning and development matters. The Planning Commission participated in a focus group conversation during an open meeting prior to their June 26th meeting.
Representative members of the four Public Focus Groups were invited to attend and spend a few minutes sharing their focus group experiences with the Planning Commissioners. The four shared their experiences and then answered a few questions from the Commissioners. The bus system was one topic of interest and changes to service hours, the central hub location, and the need to maintain a usable system for those who have no other transportation options. The bus service was seen as important for employment, but also for being able to participate in social and cultural events in the city. The challenges of redevelopment and land assembly in the existing City were also discussed. In existing neighborhoods the price of land combined with resistance of neighbors can make redevelopment more challenging and less profitable.

After the guests were done, the Planning Commissioners spent some time discussing their view of development over the past decade. Generally, Commissioners were positive with some discussion of how the Comprehensive Plan aim is often higher than what is achieved, but there was discussion of whether this was a positive or negative. There was also discussion about the need to define the character of Lincoln, and just what it is that makes Lincoln unique. There are some places in Lincoln, some of the older towns like Bethany and Havelock, that have a recognizable character and that this identity is part of what make Lincoln a special place.

There was also discussion of the bus system and how there may be a need to consider a relocation of the main transfer station. As Lincoln has grown, downtown has not really remained the center. It may be useful to have a major transfer point further east along O Street. New Urbanist development, developments catering to persons with disabilities and the need for sidewalk maintenance were also mentioned.

When asked how Commissioners view their role in development they commented that they see their role as application of planning principles to individual developments in the context of the total City. It is important to remember that every project is important to someone and each deserves full consideration. The role the Planning Commission plays in looking at each project on its own merits, but also in how it fits into the total picture is important, not to mention the public participation role.

Commissioners feel the materials they receive are good, but wish they could get them a little sooner, although they understand part of streamlining means cutting that time down as much as possible. Commissioners did request that a briefing be set up where they could be given a workshop on how to use the online tools.

Krout wrapped up by saying that one thing that has come out of the process is that neighborhood scale planning is important. It is during those smaller scale efforts that you are able to engage people and bring them into the process.

**Major Findings from Planning Staffed Boards and Committees**

All of the boards and committees felt that development in Lincoln was going very well. Several mentioned that there was more energy and excitement in Lincoln regarding new growth than they ever remember seeing before. There was some concern that although the Downtown was growing very well and the quality of development there was fairly high, the suburban edges or edges of the City were not
Focus Groups experiencing the same growth and the quality of those developments does not include good design or
durable quality. Several groups mentioned the applicants they have contact with seem to have a higher
level of buy-in to the Lincoln development process and they see fewer controversial subjects. Several of
the groups felt their role in provide some sort of consultation to improve the quality of development
contributed to overall improvements they see in the City. Flexibility and discretion were important tools
they felt the rules allowed them to use.

Boards and committees feel the staff is doing a very good job in assisting in their process. Materials are
timely and of high quality. Several groups felt the time and effort staff put in with applicants before
they are seen by these boards contributes to higher quality applications and more favorable outcomes.

Interagency Staff

Narrative Summaries

Long Range Staff
The Long Range Staff group met on June 3rd during the regular Monday Noon meeting time. Staff
included was those with responsibility for Comprehensive Plan or Long Range Transportation Plan (LRTP)
updates, Capital Improvement (CIP) or Transportation Improvement Program (TIP) planning, and other
long range projects.

Conversation centered on the Comprehensive Plan (Comp Plan) and related processes. Staff noted the
legal requirement for a comprehensive plan, and that having one was useful for applying for grants and
other types of funding. Lincoln Public Schools relies on the Comp Plan to make decisions on future
school sites and facility needs. Utilities use it to decide where and when improvements are going to be
needed. The Comp Plan is the guide to CIP planning. Although the Comp Plan should be financially
constrained, it is not market driven so sometimes doesn’t reflect what is economically possible.
Changes in the market will affect the pace, scope and direction of growth in ways that the
Comprehensive Plan can’t necessarily predict or control.

The group felt the Lincoln Lancaster County Comp Plan is particularly useful since it is a joint City-County
plan. The interdepartmental communication during the plan update process is generally good and has
lead to better communication throughout the year. Because the plan is conducted through a public
process it also serves as a barometer to see what is publicly acceptable.

The Comp Plan is used in various departments and divisions for facility planning and referenced as a
supporting document when decisions are being made. The principles and goals are important when
undertaking other planning efforts. It acts as a sort of backstop providing a credible and acceptable
vision and serving as an explanation when decisions are questioned. The group felt the Comp Plan was
general enough to provide necessary flexibility but still specific enough to guide process. The Comp Plan
can also act as an agent for change, specifically in promoting a particular policy such as the most recent
version with increased infill and redevelopment goals. They see infill and redevelopment being cited
more often by developers when trying to promote a project.
Communication between departments is going very well in some cases, but not as well in others. Having Planning staff involved in various departmental and division planning processes is good. LPS mentioned the monthly meetings with Planning and Parks as being particularly helpful. *LES was seen as one entity that needed to be brought into discussions at an earlier stage.* The County staff mentioned that having a Comp Plan that covers both jurisdictions is interesting because the interests of the City and County are not always the same.

It was suggested that during major planning efforts Departments be contacted when the topic of discussion is relevant to their department. Otherwise attention is high at first, and then wanes over time and things560(133,423),(868,509)(130,492),(859,572) get missed. It is seen as helpful to provide staff that can be involved in departmental planning efforts. Specific suggestions for improvement include *communicating to the public the need for increased City staff* as the population grows and the need for a *more viewer friendly CIP report.*

**Development Review Staff**

The Development Review Staff group met on June 3rd during the regular Monday Noon meeting time. Staff included was those with responsibility for review of development applications and proposals as part of the administrative and public processes.

Over time staff has seen the development process become *more complex on the public side.* More pieces of a project are handled through notes on a site plan and plans have become more individualized making it more complicated to implement them. *Process has sped up on the front end* when the project is at Planning, *but slowed down when it gets to the building stage* because all of details have to be worked out there. Development agreements and annexation agreements seem to be particularly *difficult to track* in regards to versioning and a lack of definition in the procedures. It would be helpful for version control and sharing comments to *access these agreements through Project Dox.* We may want to use a *commencement standards or some other type of performance standard* in place so that if the plan sat for too long the developer’s rights would be forfeited.

Changes to the development process have been good. It seems there are *fewer amendments for some plats.* *Electronic reviews work well* and the *timing is good.* It is not always possible to know whether or not comments have been addressed. Planning may want to review *how decisions are made who will see revisions* – may be wise to have all reviewers see all revisions. Some comments regarding Project Dox specifically: 1) *there should be a warning when it is about to time out so you don’t have to sign in so frequently,* 2) *need a feature so you can see if your comments have been addressed,* 3) *You cannot read another reviewer’s comments in full unless you print or copy to a word document – should be able to scroll down.* Friday morning meetings are seen as very helpful in getting reviewers together to discuss. *Attorneys commented they would prefer to be contacted more frequently rather than less.* After a certain point, a *plan has been amended so many times that it may be better to start over again with a clean slate,* rather than just adding more notes. Development may be occurring in smaller pieces with more owners which is causing the need for more amendments, rather than having one developer with a single vision who is able to carry it through. There is a need to *clarify when amendments come in just what portion of the development area is being amended?*
Major Findings from Interagency Staff
In general, staff with long range responsibilities felt the Comprehensive Plan is a very useful document and they employ it often in their departments. The Planning Department’s efforts and assistance in developing that plan, as well as in participating in many intra-agency planning efforts is seen as valuable and appreciated. There are improvements to be made, including bringing LES into planning conversations at an earlier stage and making sure individual departments are aware of specific topics of discussion that are relevant to their departments when an extended planning effort, such as an update of the Comp Plan, is being undertaken.

Staff with development review responsibilities expressed appreciation for many of the development process changes that have been made, however, in some cases, changes that streamlined the process on the “front end” mean additional work had to be done on the “back end”, usually at the time of building permit review. In general, the process seems to have become more complex for the City and County staff. The electronic review process is generally favored, with a few suggestions included in the narrative summary. There were comments that Use Permit and Special Permit plans have become overly complex with too many notes, but later it was stated that some plans are too generic at time of approval, leaving it to the building permit process to iron out details. It appears there should be some additional conversations to identify some specific suggestions for changes that could be made.

Conclusion and Action Items
Already in Progress
There were some comments from the development and other groups regarding flexibility for creative development. The Planning Department does try to remain open to different concepts and trends in development and regularly reviews standards for updates that need to be made. The development process also allows for waivers and appeals of some requirements when there is sufficient benefit to the public. The Planning Department is currently involved in a major effort (reFORM) to revise the development standards to increase the availability of administrative review.

Several of the Public groups and Boards expressed a desire to see better building standards in newer parts of the City. They also felt that some of the older areas were beginning to be rundown. A desire for increased density in existing neighborhoods through “granny flats” was specifically mentioned, as well as increased variety of housing available in commercial areas, including live-work units. The Planning Department has recently begun promoting a series of improvements, called reFORM, to the zoning code and design standards that would address issues of walkability, building attractiveness and durability, infill in existing areas, and landscaping standards. These standards would address commercial areas primarily, but could improve the visual character of new and redeveloping areas to address many of the comments heard.

Several groups pointed out the need to improve sidewalks and bike facilities, including on street routes and amenities such as parking. The Planning Department identified this need as part of the Bicycle and Pedestrian Plan and will continue to promote these improvements.
Several groups appreciated the efforts the City takes to reach citizens through varied media and encouraged the City to continue these efforts. The Planning Department developed multiple outlets for public participation during the LPlan 2040 effort and will continue to use various methods to reach as wide a variety of citizens as possible and will provide information to any other departments who would like to employ the same methods.

Public/private partnerships were mentioned by several groups as being important to the continued success of Lincoln. Lincoln has a tradition of these partnerships and will continue to foster them.

Continued protection of Greenspace was cited as being important. Planning will continue to work with Watershed Management and the Parks and Recreation department to further greenspace policies and projects.

To Be Forwarded to Other Departments
The Development group felt there needed to be other tools beyond TIF for encouraging redevelopment. This suggestion will be forwarded to the Urban Development Department (UDD) who has the major responsibility for redevelopment in existing areas of the City.

Several of the public groups emphasized the need to continue to encourage preservation of older homes. The UDD at one time had grant money available to improve structures in targeted neighborhoods. However, much of the federal funding previously used for this purpose is no longer available. The UDD will be informed that this is still a desire of many residents. The other side of these comments was the desire to have building and sanitation codes enforced on residential property. These are primarily the duties of the Building and Safety and Health departments and the comment will be forwarded on to them.

Affordable housing was identified as an area of concern. The Urban Development Department and the Lincoln Housing Authority play a large part in these efforts and should be encouraged to continue to improve the availability of affordable housing in Lincoln.

Public transit improvements were discussed by some groups as desirable for creating a vibrant and equitable community. With a planned Transit Development Plan in the next few years, StarTran will have an opportunity to address this topic holistically.

The NA/HA groups mentioned the challenge of getting information to neighborhood association members, particularly renters. Other groups also mentioned the importance of strong neighborhoods in creating the small community feel they enjoy in Lincoln. The Urban Development Department has invested significant time in developing resources for neighborhood associations, and these are available on the UDD webpage. One suggestion that is not available but may be possible is the development of a webpage template neighborhood associations could use to enter newsletter information, calendar of events, and other useful information about their association. The web pages could be hosted on the City website through the UDD page, and possibly even accessed by clicking on the Neighborhood and Homeowners Association Interactive GIS map.
The Parks Department will be forwarded the comment about development of additional recreational facilities, particularly a year round aquatics facility and additional ball fields in other areas of the City.

There was support for taking some action to improve the appearance of entryway corridors into the City. This will be passed along to the Parks and Recreation Department who is currently involved in a corridor improvement project. Planning will assist as needed.

**Future Actions for Consideration**

Several of the public groups felt that it would be helpful if there was some pre-planning done in the existing neighborhoods to determine the appropriateness of future redevelopment. The Planning Department, with the participation of the Urban Development Department, should consider an increased role for neighborhood planning in the future. These plans could identify improvements desired by the neighborhoods and engage more people in the process.

Several groups commented that often those testifying or sending in letters on projects are those who feel strongly against them, when most citizens actually are indifferent or not opposed. These opponents then end up with a disproportionate voice and can sometimes derail a project. They also commented that most people don’t really understand what the Planning Department is or that there is a Comprehensive Plan. It would be valuable to develop materials to help promote understanding of the planning process and help people understand the importance of participation in it. Ideally, materials developed for the primary and secondary schools would help to engage children early in the planning process and promote understanding of the growth and development of their City. This could be coordinated at the appropriate points in the civics curriculum to enhance teaching already taking place. A “Planning Academy” where citizens are invited to attend a series of short workshops that inform them of the planning process is also a possibility.

The Planning Commission should be given a workshop on the existing online resources on the Planning Department’s webpage.

The County Ecological Advisory Committee expressed a desire to identify some future projects in which they might participate. Planning, along with Parks and Recreation, will help them to identify these projects.

The Urban Design Committee identified some specific actions to be taken to improve meetings and communication with the group. These actions will be implemented over the coming months.

The Interagency Long Range group suggested continued communication improvements during major processes, particularly those that take many months. LES is one participant that may need additional effort to get them more involved in the process.

The Long Range group also suggested there are improvements to be made to the CIP reports to make them easier to read. This will be a major component of upcoming revisions to the CAPSTONE program.

The Interagency Development Review group had the following Project Dox suggestions:
1. Add a warning when Project Dox is about to time-out and log a user off

2. Investigate some way to display to the reviewers whether or not their comments have been addressed

3. Review the procedure for including reviewers in the review of any revisions to a project.

4. Make a change to the Application Review report to allow all reviewers to view one another’s comments by scrolling down within the comment boxes.

5. Investigate the use of Project Dox to manage development and annexation agreements, particularly to allow the tracking of versions.

There were several issues with regard to Use Permits, Special Permits, and PUDs regarding the level of detail desirable. These issues should be further discussed in a focused setting.

**Summary**

Overall the Planning Department was viewed in a positive light with some areas identified for improvement. Those participating in the survey and in the focus groups are generally happy to live in Lincoln and Lancaster County and are proud of their home. Many see Lincoln as being at a turning point where great change is coming and they feel it is important to manage that change in a way that will preserve the characteristics they cherish as well as make improvements where needed.

The Planning Department is committed to continuing the policies and practices that have contributed to this community character. Public involvement and transparency will continue to be important aspects of planning practice for the Department. The Department will continue to work toward implementation of the goals and principles of the Comprehensive Plan.

The Planning Department will forward items identified to the appropriate agencies. As always, the Planning Department will participate as appropriate in the activities of those agencies when requested.

The Action Items identified in this report will be reviewed by the Department and appropriate steps will be taken to accomplish those that are feasible and further the goals and principles of the Comprehensive Plan. Priorities will be identified over the next several months and timelines will be developed.

It has not yet been determined whether or not this process will be done on a regular schedule, but it is likely that future efforts will be made to at the very least report on the progress for action items identified. It is possible that this process may become part of the regular work cycle of the Department.
Appendix 1

Planning Assessment Survey Report

Download the complete report at this site:

Appendix 2

Focus Group Participant Invitations
Dear Survey Respondent,

Thank you for participating in the recent Planning Assessment Survey. Your responses, along with those of many others, are being compiled into a report that will be used to further improve planning and Planning Department service in the future.

As part of the survey process, you indicated your interest in participating in future focus group conversations. These focus groups are being assembled to continue the discussion on the topics identified by the survey in hopes of generating more detailed and specific data. Focus groups are to be formed of respondents with a similar set of interests as indicated by responses to the registration questions.

Because the people of Lincoln have a long tradition of participating in community planning, we have had a large number of survey respondents who are volunteering to participate in focus groups. **Due to time and staffing constraints we will only be able to invite a small number of these volunteers.**

If you feel that are you are still able to volunteer your time, **please respond to this inquiry within the next 7 days.** You will be notified within 10 days, letting you know whether you are an invitee, or simply thanking you for volunteering.

The focus group which you appear to be most closely related to is the Land use Attorney/Engineer – Development and Building Industry Professional group and is meeting on **April 30th at the Jane Snyder Trail Center, 250 N. 21st Street.** The meeting will be held from 6 to 8 pm. A brief presentation of the results of the survey will be given so that you will have a chance to recall the topics presented in the survey. The remainder of the meeting is dedicated to guided discussion on the growth and development of Lincoln and the specific service provided by the Planning Department.

We are looking for focus group members who are able to openly discuss their viewpoints and participate in a free discussion. Focus groups are expected to include between 10 and 15 participants and last 1 ½ to 2 hours. Light refreshments will be served. Planning staff will be present to guide the discussion and take notes during the conversation.

Whether or not you serve on a focus group, the Planning Department would like to **thank you for participating in the survey and helping us to better serve this community.**

Marvin Krout, Director  
Lincoln and Lancaster County Planning Department  
555 S. 10th St  
Lincoln, NE 68508  
402-441-7491
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The focus group which you appear to be most closely related to is the Business Owner and Professional group and is meeting on May 2nd at the Jane Snyder Trail Center, 250 N. 21st Street. The meeting will be held from 6 to 8 pm. A brief presentation of the results of the survey will be given so that you will have a chance to recall the topics presented in the survey. The remainder of the meeting is dedicated to guided discussion on the growth and development of Lincoln and the specific service provided by the Planning Department.

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The focus group which you appear to be most closely related to is the Neighborhood or Homeowner Association member/Interested Citizen group. There are two meeting dates scheduled for this group: May 7th and May 14th, both Tuesdays, at the Jane Snyder Trail Center, 250 N. 21st Street. The meeting will be held from 6 to 8 pm. A brief presentation of the results of the survey will be given so that you will have a chance to recall the topics presented in the survey. The remainder of the meeting is dedicated to guided discussion on the growth and development of Lincoln and the specific service provided by the Planning Department.

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