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## **Economic officials: Lincoln does well; can do better**

*BY DEENA WINTER / Lincoln Journal Star*

Lincoln has no choice — it's growing. It's becoming a major employment center. A major retail center. "And we need to be planning at all levels to make that happen in an orderly manner that protects the integrity and quality of life that we have now," says Lincoln Chamber of Commerce President Jim Fram.

As the 2002 Angelou Report recommended, the city of Lincoln needs to unencumber its planning and permitting process, he said. The city already has been working to open up more areas to development and provide those areas with infrastructure — and then figure out how to pay for that infrastructure.

"Right now we're experiencing a very steep rise in housing prices because there's a lot shortage," Fram said. "We need to turn that around."

He said cities experiencing healthy job growth have a positive attitude

that asks, "How do we make a project happen?"

"Too many times we're spending time trying to figure out how to not make it work," he said of Lincoln.

The city is doing more to make things happen than it was a few years ago, Fram said, but it still needs to do more.

The chamber is targeting value-added agriculture and biotechnology to provide quality jobs, he said.

Lincoln has a leg up, because it already has a biotechnology presence with Novartis Pharmaceuticals Corp., MDS Pharma Services, Pfizer Inc. and several smaller companies.

City-county Planning Commissioner Dan Marvin would like to see Lincoln find industrial tracts for primary employers, which create and ship goods, integrate recruitment efforts with

the University of Nebraska-Lincoln business college and recruit employers that pay higher wages.

He believes Lincoln should capitalize on its low insurance premium taxes and favorable regulatory environment by recruiting more insurance companies.

Brad Korell, finance director for engineering and consulting firm Olsson Associates, said Lincoln has a lot going for it, but needs to better nurture and create more business enterprises to retain young people.

"We are not nurturing these companies of the future as well as I think we should," he said. "We certainly aren't as aggressive in attracting and cultivating more of the high-tech companies that I think will be important to Lincoln's future."

Lincoln should target jobs in biotechnology and information technology, and nurture those already here or emerging with venture capital and places for new businesses, he said.

"Those are the ones we need to put our arms around and make sure they grow and stay here," Korell

said. "We're kind of behind when you look at where other cities are."

Neighborhood leader Carol Brown said if the city is going to attract more visitors to its doorstep, it will have to get better at enticing such things as a motor sports complex. She's on a motor sports task force that hasn't met for five weeks, she said.

Brown said the city needs to re-address the issue of re-leasing Lincoln Electric System's excess fiber optic line capacity to attract technology companies. And don't forget small businesses, she cautioned. She'd like the city to encourage small businesses and entrepreneurs to develop small business parks in all corners of the city.

"No big box stuff," she said. Several city leaders said they're concerned sharply rising Lincoln housing prices are pricing people out of the market, particularly in the new housing market. Korell said new construction is skewed toward high-end homes, with lot prices going up 10 percent to 20 percent per year, and very little available in the mid-range.

Down the road, Fram envisions a connection between Omaha and Lincoln similar to that between Dallas and Fort Worth

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"We both (would) kind of exist in the same economy but have two distinct cities with separate personalities."

He said Lincoln and Omaha are talking about how to develop the corridor so it's pleasing and orderly, "so it doesn't appear to be wild, abandoned growth for growth's sake."

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