

'Conversation' looks at Lincoln's future

BY MATT OLBERDING / Lincoln Journal Star

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Joan Dietrich isn't exactly a fan of developers.

She thinks rapid growth in homebuilding is driving land prices to ridiculous heights. She noted that Habitat for Humanity can't find enough affordable lots on which to build its low-cost homes.

But after listening to developer and former City Councilman Joe Hampton during a panel discussion Thursday night, Dietrich said she could at least see the developers' point of view.

"It gave me more of a feel for how they look at things," she said.

Hampton and Dietrich were among the dozens of people who participated in a Community Conversation about the future of Lincoln. The event was at Andersen Hall, home of the University of Nebraska-Lincoln's College of Journalism and Mass Communications.

Participants were asked to address this question: How can Lincoln keep the qualities we treasure and develop a vital economy that provides good jobs for us and our children?

Many had strong opinions about that question.

Chris Wilhelm wondered whether a hotel at 17th and Q streets proposed by Missouri developer John Q. Hammons, which would require displacing existing businesses, was a good idea.

Though the city has touted the potential economic benefits, including job creation, Wilhelm is skeptical.

She noted that most of the jobs likely would pay minimum wage.

"I'm not looking at that as a real community benefit," she said.

Doc Chaves said he didn't think Lincoln officials should be forcing development at 48th and O streets by declaring the area blighted.

Chaves said the businesses that left had good reasons for doing so, and if other businesses want to be in that area, eventually they will.

"Let the market decide that," Chaves said.

Dennis Schock said that while he supported schools, he didn't want to see his property taxes continue to rise.

But Rachel Sturm said Lincoln's schools did a wonderful job and deserved to have their needs funded.

"I don't mind paying more taxes for schools," she said.

Those who participated in Thursday night's discussions were selected at random by the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center and were paid \$35 to compensate them for their time.

The participants already had taken a telephone survey about their views on Lincoln issues.



They then got short briefing papers on economic development, schools, impact fees and downtown/Antelope Valley.

The participants met in small groups Thursday night to discuss the issues before being briefed by a panel of local experts.

After the panel discussion they took a survey to gauge whether their opinions changed. The process is called deliberative polling.

Sherell Price said hearing the panel of experts helped her to better understand business incentives.

Jim Fram, president of the Lincoln Chamber of Commerce, explained during the discussion that though he doesn't like to use economic incentives, they were a necessary evil. He also explained the types of industries that Lincoln targets.

In addition to Hampton and Fram, other members of the panel were Jennifer Brinkman of the Lincoln Neighborhood Alliance; Kathy Campbell, a former county commissioner; Susan Gourley, Lincoln Public Schools superintendent; and Cecil Steward, president of the Joslyn Castle Institute for Sustainable Communities and former dean of the UNL College of Architecture.

Most of the participants interviewed after the discussions said that although it was a good first step, they didn't really feel like they'd had their questions fully answered.

The Community Conversation is a collaboration among Leadership Lincoln, the University of Nebraska Public Policy Center and the Lincoln Journal Star. It is supported by the Cooper Foundation and the Woods Charitable Fund.

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