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FACTORS THAT CAUSE GROWTH AND DEVELOPMENT IN THE CITY OF LINCOLN, NE

By

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University of Nebraska-Lincoln, 2011

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Abstract

This qualitative study looks at what factors may contribute to the outward growth and development of the city of Lincoln, Nebraska. The two main factors the study discusses are the Lincoln Public School planners and their placement of schools in the city, and the “American dream” of the people, looking at where the people of Lincoln want to be living throughout the city and what some of their daily habits are. This study also discusses some of the main visions of the city of Lincoln’s 2040 Comprehensive Plan how the plan’s ambitions may affect the two factors looked at in the study. It is important for the citizens of Lincoln to understand the difference between sustainable and unsustainable development practices for the city, in order to preserve a high quality of life for citizens in future generations.

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Introduction

A city's growth and development is something that occurs on a daily basis and everyone is affected by it in one way or another. There are two basic types of growth: 1) growth that is sustainable and 2) growth that is unsustainable. Sustainable growth, often paired with the term "smart growth," includes principles such as creating a range of housing opportunities and choices, designing walkable neighborhoods, fostering distinctive and attractive communities with a strong sense of place, mixing land uses, preserving open space, farmland and critical environmental areas, providing a variety of transportation choices, taking advantage of compact building design, and strengthening and directing development towards existing communities (Smart Growth Online, 2010). Unsustainable growth involves the spreading of a city in an outward direction, where the percent of annual land increase for a city is much greater than the percentage of annual population increase for that city. This is typically also referred to as "urban sprawl" and contributes to the creation of suburbs, strip malls, and the need to supply more infrastructure. This sprawling can also lead to a great degradation of our natural lands, including farmland and critical habitat. In order for our society to sustain itself with projected population growth, there needs to be a greater push toward more sustainable growth patterns. In order to do this, there must be an understanding of how a city grows and develops. One also needs to understand what some of the possible causes of the unsustainable growth practices seen in our communities. This study will look at some of the main factors that cause growth and development in the city of Lincoln, Nebraska.

There are several driving factors that cause our communities to become a sprawling network of disassociated communities. School placement and planning is one factor, since many families feel it is important to live close to good schools. In his article entitled *Lincoln, Nebraska, Public School Systems: The Advance Scouts for Urban Sprawl*, sustainable developer Cecil Steward states, "It has become standard practice for the school system planners to attempt to anticipate future growth directions of the city (Steward,

1999).” Another factor that this study looks at is the perceived image of the “American dream,” or detached single family homes, with their very own large lawn, a white picket fence, and an attempt to get away from the crime and hustle-bustle of the city. This study also takes a look at the current 2040 Comprehensive Plan for the city of Lincoln to see what the planning department has in store for the growth and development of the city of Lincoln.

Materials and Methods

A qualitative analysis of current literature on these three factors was conducted. The resulting analysis is used to assist the discussion and conclusion of factors that cause growth and development of the city of Lincoln, NE. Some of the studies included in the literature review were found using the JSTOR site, a digital archive of over one thousand academic journals and other scholarly content available to all University of Nebraska-Lincoln students (JSTOR, 2011). Key words used in the literature search include: ‘urban sprawl,’ ‘private city development,’ ‘American dream,’ and ‘sustainable development.’ The literature review will also include a discussion of the City of Lincoln 2040 Comprehensive Plan which is available to the general public at the city’s InterLinc website (Lancaster County Planning Department, 2011).

A personal interview with Cecil Steward, a world expert on sustainable development and sustainable design, was conducted by the author to gain more information on the topic of school placement in Lincoln, NE and its effect on the city’s growth. During the time Steward served on the Lincoln Planning Commission, he was able to see the factors of development in the city of Lincoln first hand. A survey of Lincoln citizens was conducted in order to get a general idea of their ‘American dream.’ The survey was created by the author with the use of the Adobe FormsCentral program. The program allowed for the review of both individual responses, which gave no personal identifiable information, and for the creation of a summary report (figures 3-10), showing statistical percentages for each question’s response. Survey respondents were gathered through the use of survey mailings as well as through physical surveying throughout Lincoln in various locations

including: University of Nebraska-Lincoln city and east campus areas, and around both Westfield Gateway and South Pointe Pavilions malls in the city of Lincoln. These locations were chosen because they are relatively high traffic areas and show a good mix of age ranges as well as locations of residency around the city of Lincoln. Only respondents from Lincoln were asked to partake in the survey.

Results of the Literature Review

In order to give a basis to the issue of sprawl and the importance of the use of more sustainable growth and development patterns, the first source of literature will explain the origins of sprawl and how it came to be a regular part of the average American life. John M. Levy discusses the history of planning in his publication, *Contemporary Urban Planning* (Levy, 2009), which he splits up into two different categories: *Urbanization in the Nineteenth Century* and *Urban Trends in the Twentieth Century*—this study will do the same. The literature review will then look at the Lincoln Public School system as a factor of growth and development, including the interview on the topic with Cecil Steward. Finally the last section on the literature review will be looking at the 2040 Comprehensive Plan for the city of Lincoln.

Urbanization in the Nineteenth Century

Levy discusses that in the year 1800 the urbanized population of the United States was 300,000, or roughly 6 percent of the total U.S. population of 5 million. By the year 1900, the urban population had risen in numbers to 30 million, with a total population of 76 million. About 40 percent of the total population was now living in urbanized areas. There were several factors that lead to this rapid urbanization. Birthrate was increasing as death rate was decreasing, along with high levels of immigration to the U.S. Urbanization was also a side effect of the industrial revolution, since agricultural machinery was making farmers more productive, workers were able to begin finding jobs in more industrial, urbanized areas. The industrial revolution also caused a shift from cottage industries to factory production, creating the need for mass labor forces at specific points, which created a need for mass housing nearby.

Levy identifies that the distinguishing feature of many nineteenth-century cities was concentration and density. He explains that one of the big reasons why there was such high density is due to the transportation technology of the age. By the 1880's, electric motor and power transmissions technology made it possible for the creation of the electric street car. This marks one of the first steps in the decentralization of the dense cities. It was said that three miles was a comfortable distance that the average person could walk in an hour. With the advancement in transportation technology, people were no longer limited to the urban core they worked in. People began feeling the city to be too crowded, and saw the advantages of being able to buy up larger pieces of land at lower costs towards the outside of the city limits. Population trends began to change drastically. Population increase in the central city slowed and almost came to a halt, while population in suburban regions began to increase rapidly, leading into the twentieth century.

Urban Trends in the Twentieth Century

Levy explains how the suburban portion of the total population began to grow very rapidly from the first postwar census in 1950. This growth continued rapidly through the 2000 census. "For population, the big decentralizing force was the automobile. Its speed and flexibility of route and schedule were preconditions for large scale suburbanization (Levy, 2009)." In around 1915, when mass production of Henry Ford's Model T began, the number of personal automobiles increased rapidly from about 5 million to 25 million by 1930. Several other forces accelerated decentralization. Improved technologies, including long-distance telephone calls, computers, television, e-mail, and fax, reduced the need for face-to-face contact. In suburban areas mortgage finance was readily available, employment was high, and incomes were rising rapidly. Since there was an increase in wealth, the country had extra money to spend on land development, on housing, and on the additional personal transportation that suburbanization required. "Automobile ownership rose from 25 million in 1945 to about 40 million in 1950, to 62 million in 1960, to 89 million in 1970, to 122 million in 1980, and 134 million in 1990 (Levy, 2009)." Automobile ownership increased from one automobile for every five

Americans at the end of World War II to one automobile for every 1.9 Americans by 1990. The expansion of the national highway system greatly added to this rush to the suburbs. Figure 1 shows the correlation between automobile ownership in the United States and the population increase to the suburbs. Population information for the United States was gathered from the U.S. Census Bureau (U.S. Dept of Commerce, 2011).

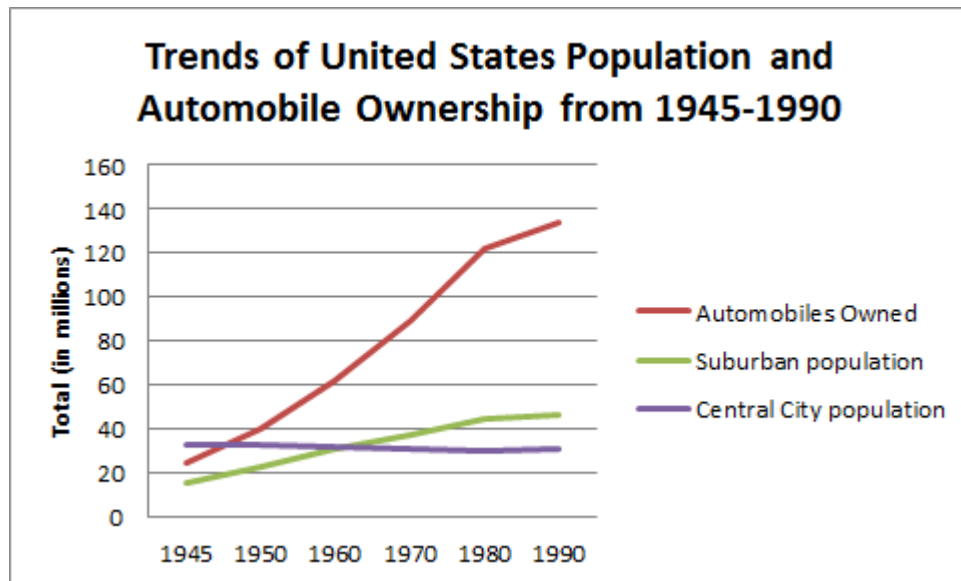


Figure 1. Trends of United States Population and Automobile Ownership from 1945-1990.

From figure 1, the trend for population during this time frame was that the suburban population was starting to increase, while the central city area population began decreasing and then stabilized, while automobile ownership increased dramatically during this same time. Cities began to increase in land area as more people began flocking to the suburban regions.

School Placement as a Factor of Growth and Development

Since about 1965, Lincoln's jurisdictional limits have grown from 41.36 square miles to 69.45 square miles in around the year 2000. During the same period, Lincoln Public Schools (LPS) added one high school, three middle schools, two children centers, and nine elementary schools to the city of Lincoln. LPS has also

added two more high schools in Lincoln: Southwest High School in 2002 and North Star High School in 2003. During this time, Cecil Steward was able to witness the patterns and realized that, “It has become standard practice for the school system planners ‘to anticipate future growth directions of the city.’ And, to be the first to acquire developable property in key locations in advance of their development interests (Steward, 1999).”

In an interview, Cecil Steward refers to LPS as the Lincoln *Independent* School System, meaning that LPS is its own entity and they have the ability to purchase any land that they like without attention to Lincoln’s current comprehensive plan or approval by the planning department. Although they generally will discuss plans with the planning department, there are no requirements to do so. In the end, the final decision is made by the school department planners. The only restrictions that really apply to LPS are the infrastructure boundaries that are set in the current comprehensive plan for the city. Infrastructure includes electrical lines, sanitary lines, and roads which are already well established in the central city area. When development happens outside of the city there is a need to increase this infrastructure to these new developments, which costs the city extra money and in term ends up raising taxes for all citizens of the city. The infrastructure boundaries are put in place by the city planning department as a conscious attempt to decrease the outward growth of the city and decrease the need to supply and extend more infrastructure. Due to the need for LPS planners to save the cost of supplying their own infrastructure, they will generally purchase land that is relatively tight with the set boundary, so the city will supply it for them.

It is more economically effective for LPS planners to choose raw land parcels towards the outside of the central city area because they can get land at a cheaper price and they get their pick of prime land for their school sites. This is why they are a big factor in the outward growth of the city. Once the school planners purchase a land parcel, it is not long after that private developers follow. A lot of the time, the private developers are working directly with the school planners. In order for each party to get the best site possible, the school planners and the private developers trade off and sell land parcels to each other. Steward explains

that most private developers think the only houses people want are new houses on large lots—the bigger the house the better. So it is very important for them to get first pick of land where growth is anticipated. It is almost a domino effect how you first have the LPS planners choosing land to purchase on the outside edge of the city to anticipate the future growth of the city. Then the developers come to purchase land surround LPS’s chosen site. After that, the developers begin constructing luxurious house in hopes that a new community will develop. Once the school is in place and the houses are in place, people will begin to move to these nice, brand new houses and a new suburban community is born.

2040 Comprehensive Plan for the City of Lincoln

The city of Lincoln drafts a new comprehensive plan every 10 years. The plan outlines Lincoln and Lancaster County’s shared visions for the future. It shows how the city plans to grow, enhance what makes the city special, and how these ideals will be implemented throughout the city to benefit all citizens. The promise of the 2040 comprehensive plan is:

to maintain and enhance the health, safety and welfare of our community during times of change, to promote our ideals and values as changes occur, and to meet the needs of today without sacrificing the ability of future generations to meet their needs. LPlan 2040 is specific to Lincoln and Lancaster County and it recognizes the factors that make us unique. This Plan acknowledges the importance and interconnectedness of economic, environmental, and socio-cultural domains, and the ways in which technology and public policy are applied and affect outcomes in these domains. The Plan therefore is a combination of practicality and vision, and provides guidelines for sustaining the rich mosaic that now characterizes our growing community. (Lancaster County Planning Department, 2011)

The planning department identifies nine “vision statements” for the city of Lincoln and Lancaster county including: one community, quality of life assets, economic opportunity, Downtown Lincoln—the heart of our

community, healthy community, environmental stewardship and sustainability, interaction between the comprehensive plan and the citizens, vision for 2040 and beyond, and community resiliency.

The 2040 Comprehensive Plan places a lot of emphasis on reinvesting in the central city area and creating walkable, inviting neighborhoods and communities. Some of the main highlights from the plan include: target existing underdeveloped or redeveloped commercial and industrial areas, promote activities of daily living within walking distance, help to create neighborhoods that include homes, stores, workplaces, schools, and places to recreate, preserve existing affordable housing in the central city and promote creation of new affordable housing in the community, promote diversity of housing types and choices throughout each neighborhood for an increasingly diverse population. The planning department identified nodes and transportation corridors throughout the city that would benefit from mixed-use redevelopment and increased density (figure 2). The outline around the city in figure 2 shows the plan for Lincoln's future service limit. This service limit will help restrict future developments from being too far away from the central city.

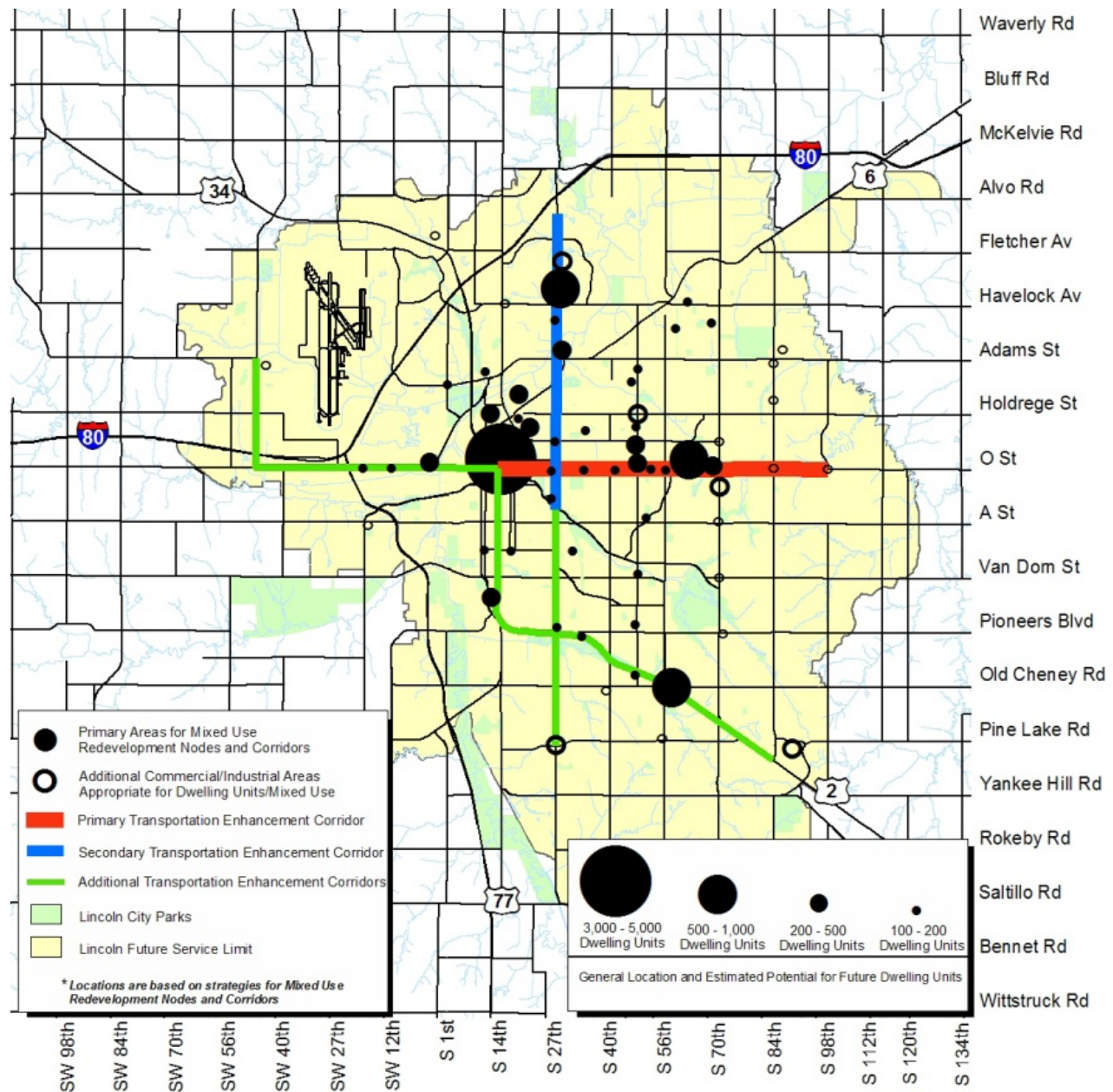


Figure 2. Mixed Use Redevelopment Nodes and Corridors Map.

Results of the Survey

The survey gained a total of 250 respondents. Again, no personal identifying information was collected on those surveyed and only Lincoln residents were surveyed. The data collected showed a pretty well distributed respondent group. Figure 3 through figure 5 show the respondent demographic. All respondents were shown the same map of Lincoln in order to answer questions in figures 5 and 6.

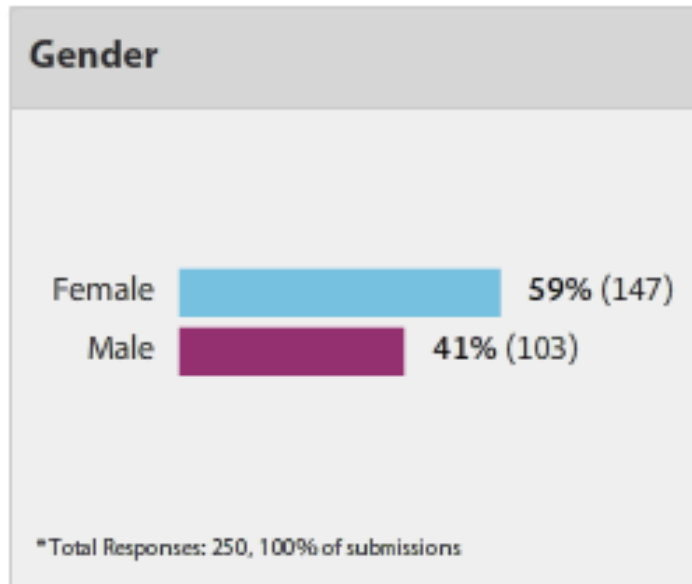


Figure 3. Gender of Respondents.

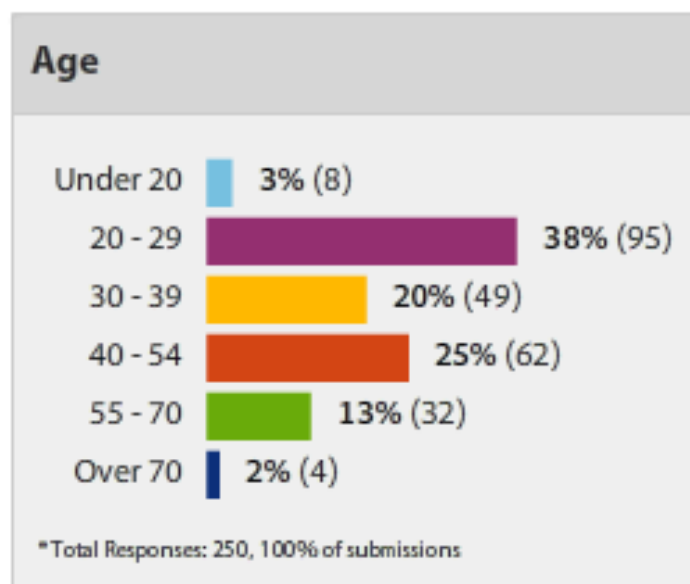


Figure 4. Age of Respondents.

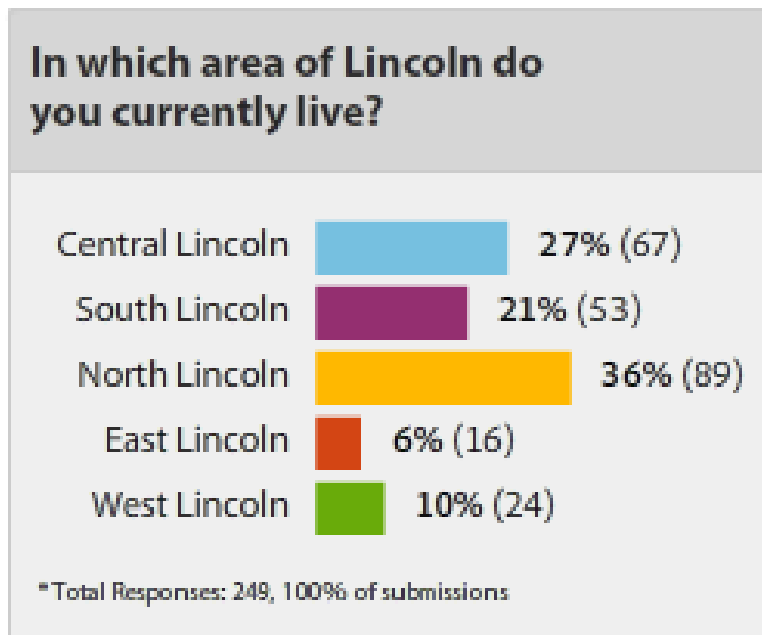
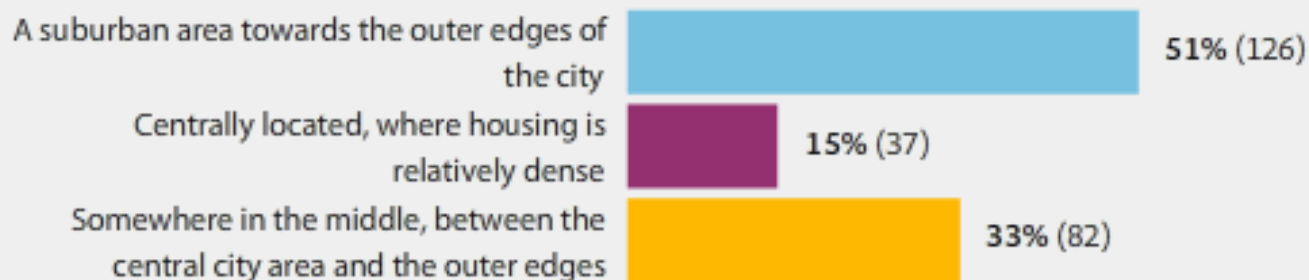


Figure 5. City Distribution of Respondents.

Respondents were asked to give their opinion on what area in Lincoln would they rather live, whether it be in the central city area, in the suburban area around the outer edge of the city, or somewhere in between the central city and the outer edges (figure 6). From the results, a majority of fifty-one percent of respondents choose the suburban area towards the outer edges of the city. The results showed a minority of only fifteen percent of the respondents would choose to live in the central city area of Lincoln. To correlate with this data, the respondents were also asked how important it is for them and their family to own their own property, given the options: very important, somewhat important, not very important, not important at all, and not sure (figure 7). Again, a majority of respondents, fifty-five percent said it was very important to own property. A total of eighty-one percent said it was either somewhat or very important to own property, leaving only sixteen percent of respondents saying that it's either not very important or not important at all to own their own property, with three percent saying they were unsure.

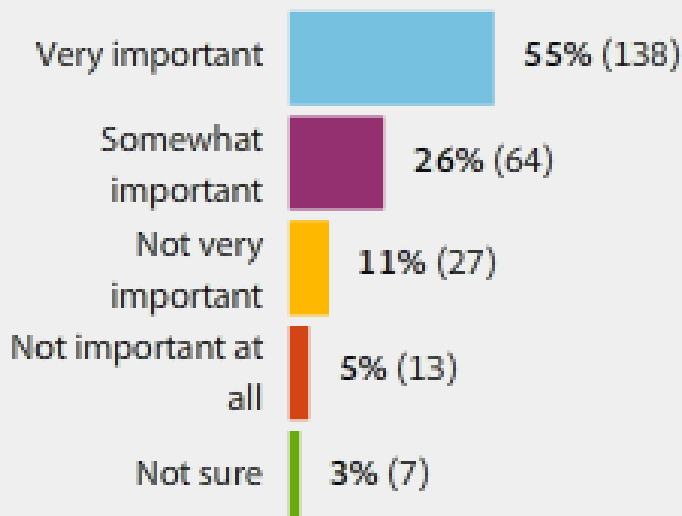
Given the choice, in which area of Lincoln would you live? (Please refer to the



*Total Responses: 245, 98% of submissions

Figure 6. Preferred Area to Live in Lincoln.

How important is it for you and your family to own your own property?



*Total Responses: 249, 100% of submissions

Figure 7. Importance of Property Ownership.

Respondents were also asked questions relating to their daily habits to get a feel of how much they spend, on average, driving to work each day, how often they use public transportation, and what percentage of their daily commute is walking. When asked how much, on average, they spend driving to and from work each day, fifty-eight percent of respondents answered twenty minutes or less (figure 8). Most respondents answered very rarely, or never to the question of how often they travel to daily destinations using transportation alternative to driving a personal vehicle, such as example public transportation, biking or walking (figure 9). Seventy-six percent of respondents said they use these alternative forms of transportation from zero to one day a week. Keeping with the same trend, when respondents were asked what percentage of their daily commute is walking or biking (figure 10). The survey showed that eighty-two percent of respondents spend less than ten percent of their daily commute walking or biking. While only nine percent of respondents spent more than fifty percent of their daily commutes either walking or biking.

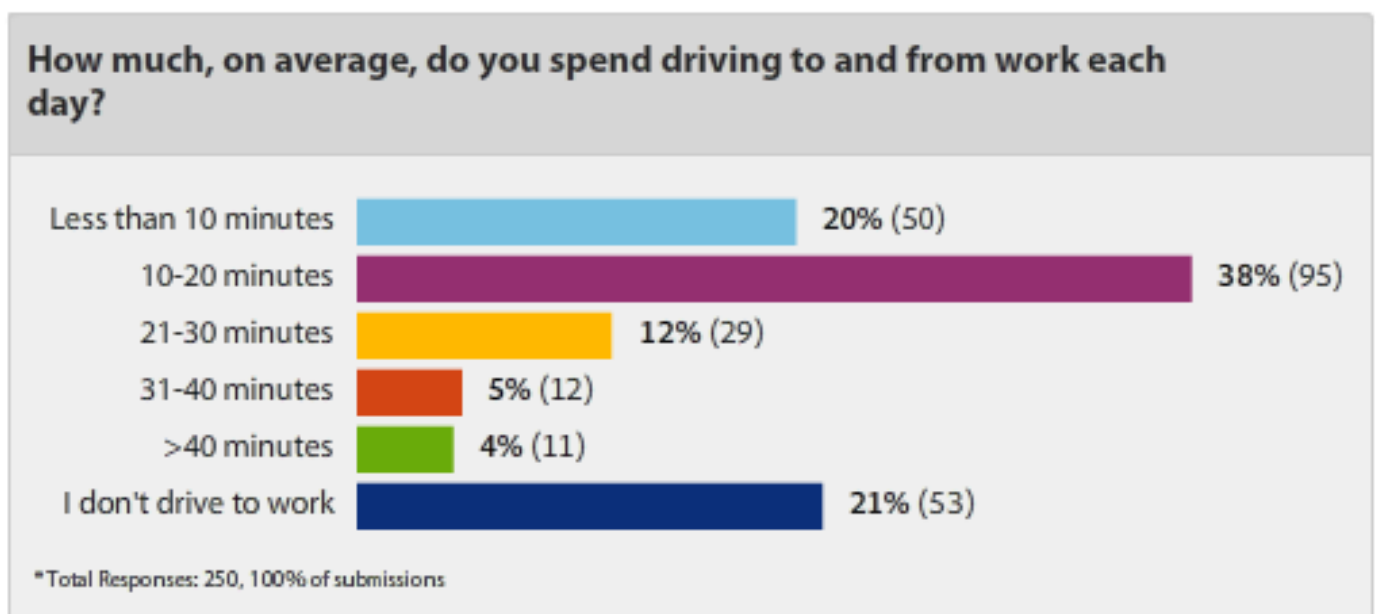
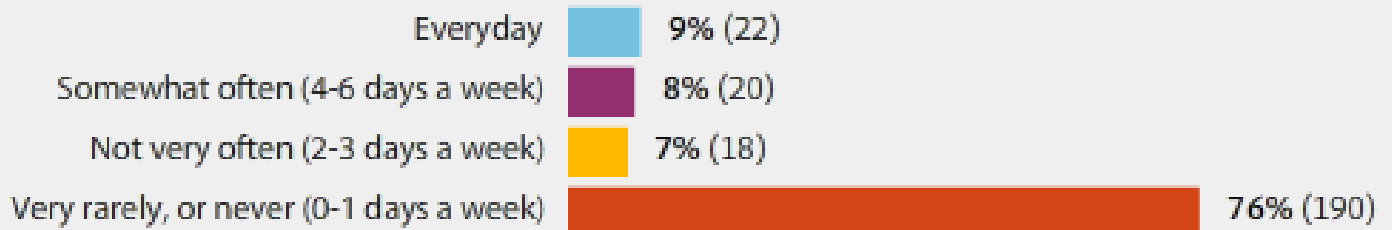


Figure 8. Average Drive Time Per Day.

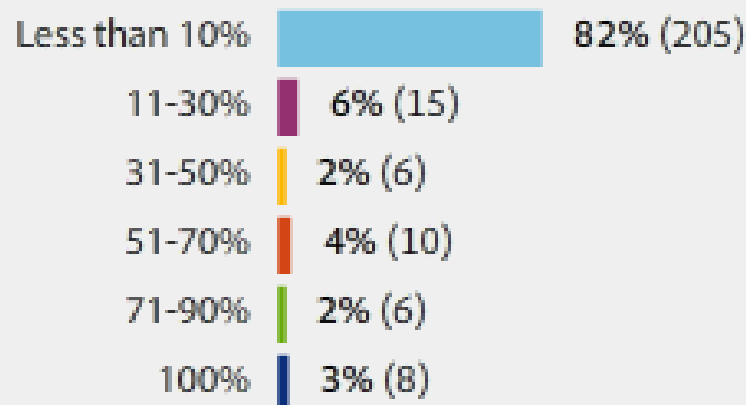
How often do you travel to daily destinations using transportation alternative to driving a personal vehicle in an average week? (i.e. public transportation, biking, walking)



*Total Responses: 250, 100% of submissions

Figure 9. Average Public Transportation Usage.

What percent (%) of your daily commute is walking or biking?



*Total Responses: 250, 100% of submissions

Figure 10. Percent of Daily Commute Walking or Biking.

Discussion

Urbanization and Trends in the Nineteenth and Twentieth Centuries

In order to get a proper understanding of where we are now as a city, it is necessary to understand how we got to where we are now. Throughout the *Results of the Literature Review* section, it becomes clear to see how the suburbs of the country were created and what some of the main reasons for decentralization in the county as well. With the industrial revolution in place, urban centers began to grow, as previously stated the urban population in the U.S. was forty percent by the beginning of the 1900s. The industrial revolution, at first, seemed like the ideal situation for many Americans, since technological advances decreased the need for extra hands on the family farms. In the city, someone could make even more money for their family working in a brand new factory. As more and more people began moving towards the urban core of the city, it was becoming less and less of a place the people wanted to be. Living conditions weren't up to par, not even close to today's standards, and people were restricted within walking distance of where they lived, since transportation technologies were still in the works. Then with the development of the electric motor in the late 1800s, the public street car was created, allowing people to live a little further away than walking distance; this is what flipped the switch towards decentralization. As even more technological advances came about in the twentieth century, people began to realize that it was less necessary for them to live within walking distance of their work place. The mass production of Henry Ford's Model T in the early twentieth century is what really made decentralization possible. It can be easily seen in figure 1 that there was a very rapid increase in automobile ownership while there was a pretty steady increase in population in the suburban U.S. The number of automobiles, compared to the population, reveals that many households owned multiple cars, as it was necessary for the husband to have a car for work and the wife to have a car for her daily activities, then when the children were old enough, they also needed their own vehicle to get around. Why would someone live in an overcrowded city when they could live in a suburban area, away from

the drudgery of work, where they can purchase more land at a cheaper price than in the urban core of the city? America was the land of the free and the American people felt that they had the right to live where ever they wanted, and why shouldn't they be able to? If an area is not appealing to live in, then why shouldn't they move someplace that is more appealing for them?

School Placement as a Factor of Growth and Development

It all boils down to the economic benefit of the parties involved. Lincoln Public School (LPS) planners are basically given the ability to make their own decision without the requirement of checking in with the city planners on determining future sites for schools. It is unfortunate that LPS is allowed to take the land they've purchased towards the outside of the city and promote it, trade it, and sell it to private developers in order for both parties to gain the economic benefits they desire. It is not sustainable for a city to allow for the creation of large, new communities on the outward edges of the city. The city will have to continue to increase infrastructure past its current boundaries, thus increasing the cost of taxes for the rest of the city. This, as we saw earlier with the creation of new suburbs, can cause a flight away from current dwellings closer to the city and increase the amount of blighted areas we have in the city.

2040 Comprehensive Plan for the City of Lincoln

With the 2040 Comprehensive Plan, the city of Lincoln has hopes that it will continue to restrict the infrastructure boundaries in order to keep developments from increasing the land area of the city at a too rapid pace. It would be a great risk for LPS planners to continue purchasing land on the outer edges of the city with Lincoln's vision for the future of reinvesting in the central core and the new nodes surrounding it. The greatest risk they run is that the city may not supply the infrastructure to these outer developments. If the city is not going to provide the infrastructure, the developers either have to pay for it themselves, or rely on impact fees or some other solution. Hopefully with the focus of redeveloping the central city areas, this will

cause a change in the development practices of LPS and other private developers. There will need to be a change, for example, of LPS's idea that a school needs to have an excessive amount of green space around it. Instead of buying up one large lot for a school, a few smaller lots inside the central city can be purchased with shared sports fields and other programs. Placing emphasis on building upwards rather than outwards is necessary in order to maintain a healthy environment for future generations. One big hurdle the city of Lincoln may have to overcome is the daily practices and opinions of the people of Lincoln and how that correlates to the 2040 comprehensive plan.

Correlation between survey results and the 2040 Comprehensive Plan

The results of the survey were a little surprising. With the preference for people to live in the suburban areas around the city tied in with the importance they place on property ownership, it may be hard for the city of Lincoln to increase the population densities in the nodes they have chosen throughout the central city area. However, people are going to want to live where it is most appealing for them and their family. If the city's current comprehensive plan accomplishes what it has planned, it will give Lincoln's core that appealing look. This is where the phrase "if you build it, they will come," explains that if Lincoln's core becomes a nice, clean, welcoming place with walkability planned throughout, the people will want to live in this area and they will in turn begin using less personal transportation and rely more on walking, biking, and public transportation for their daily needs. It was also surprising to see that the current lifestyle of Lincoln residents is very focused on personal vehicle usage.

In figure 8, a majority of the respondents said that they are driving less than twenty minutes to get to work. This means that, although they live relatively close to where they work, the primary choice still is to drive a personal vehicle. Again, if the 2040 Comprehensive Plan follows through with its vision, the creation of walkable, inviting neighborhoods with most daily activities within easy walking distance, there should be a decrease in personal vehicle usage. In correlation with the data from figure 8, figure 9 shows that currently

most respondents are not taking public transportation or other alternative forms of transportation at all or more than once per week. With the creation of the future transportation corridors that the 2040 Comprehensive Plan identifies (figure 2), public transportation should see increased usage throughout the city. So, if people are choosing to drive when it may not be necessary, and they're not using public transportation or other alternative forms of transportation, the responses gathered on the average percentage of a respondents daily commute that is walking or biking are not all that surprising. Only eighteen percent of all 250 respondents said that they walk or bike more than ten percent of their daily commute. When the vast majority of the respondents are walking or biking less than ten percent of their daily commute, it's not surprising that there are so many health problems. This says that people are pretty much walking to their cars in the morning, driving to their destination, walking inside, walking back to their cars, perhaps driving to their mailboxes in their suburban neighborhoods, driving home, then walking back inside. How can that help create a sustainable community? Again, if things follow through the way they're planned in the 2040 Plan, then the city of Lincoln will become a much more desirable place to live, especially in the central core. People will end up walking more when things are within an easy distance because it will become more convenient to do so.

Summary and Conclusions

A city's growth and development is something that is going to have an effect on all of its residents. If citizens are not made aware of the importance of sustainable development practices, there is no way for the city to thrive and be a good place to live for future generations. This study looked at what factors might contribute to the growth and development of the city of Lincoln, NE in an outward direction. The two main factors discussed were the Lincoln Public School department building schools at the outer edges of the city, and the idea of the "American dream" for the citizens of Lincoln, through surveying. This study also discusses

the 2040 Comprehensive Plan for the city of Lincoln, in order to get a better understanding of where the city is planning its growth and how the city plans to redevelop the central city area.

With the results of the study, it can be concluded that LPS is one of the very first developers to choose land on the outer edges of the city, in order to get the proper lot size, the proper location, and the ideal price for the land. Once LPS purchases a lot of land in hopes that they can anticipate the future outward growth of the city, private developers follow closely behind them and work with LPS to trade and sell land parcels so each party leaves with their ideal site for development. This way, it is almost guaranteed that a community will start to develop once the school is built and a new suburb will be born. The only real restrictions that LPS has to worry about are those restrictions on infrastructure that are made by the city planning department.

The “American dream” of the people of Lincoln also showed that it is a driving force in the outward growth and development of Lincoln. It is very much preferred by the respondents to live away from the central city area and more towards the suburbs, which goes hand-in-hand with the importance the respondents place on property ownership. It can also be seen, from the results that the respondents were choosing to drive their own personal vehicles as opposed to using public transportation, walking or biking. Respondents are also doing very little walking throughout their daily commutes. If developers are creating housing on the outer edges of the city where the new schools are being built, then there is want from the citizens to live in these new communities. This is one of the biggest hurdles that the city of Lincoln Planning Department will need to overcome.

With the 2040 Comprehensive Plan, Lincoln has a vision for redevelopment of existing areas within the central city, the creation of walkable, inviting neighborhoods that will look appealing to its citizens and a focus on mixed-use development where all citizens have easy access to their daily needs within walking distance. If this comprehensive plan continues on a sustainable path of development, they may very well be able to complete their goal for the city. The 2040 Plan also outlines a tighter boundary for infrastructure, in hopes to

reduce the outward development of the city. This will hopefully help change the practices of the LPS planners and restrict them enough to get them to think about more redevelopment in the central city area, providing more schools for the city's planned increased density nodes. If the city is able to follow through with the visions of the 2040 Plan, the city of Lincoln will become a healthy, walkable, sustainable city that will see an increase in population and a boost in the city's economic growth.

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