

third dimension

Development adds to 'active downtown'

By Ron Ruggless

While downtowns in cities across the nation are dying or choking their last breath, Lincoln is attempting to save its downtown from the fatal disease of disintegration.

Through a Lincoln Center Development Program instituted by the Mayor-appointed and city council approved Downtown Advisory Council and the Lincoln Center Development Association (LCDA), plans to protect downtown Lincoln's future have been outlined.

Lansford Jorgenson, LCDA executive director, said projects to remodel downtown have started and a major push should begin in the spring.

Temporary parking will be available in the spring when some of the buildings on the block bounded by 10th, 11th, N and O streets are demolished, he said, to make way for the shopping-retail center called the Centrum.

About 85 per cent of the buildings on the south half of the block and around 50 per cent of those on the north half have been purchased by the city, according to Charles Humble, city attorney and acting Centrum project director.

Lawsuits filed

Three condensed lawsuits by businesses on the block have been filed, Humble added, and construction on the Centrum must wait until the court decided.

He said this is the first case of its kind in Nebraska. He is uncertain when the lawsuits will be tired.

If the court cases are cleared, plans indicate that the Centrum will include five levels of parking on the south half of the block, making space for about 1,000 cars, and on the upper three levels of the north half.

The lower two levels on the north, facing O Street, would be left for private development and city approved investment, Humble said.

These two levels of the \$7.8 million Centrum will house retail and business outlets. Trees, greenery and beautification of this area will blend with the planned O Street remodeling.

Signatures have been obtained from more than 51 per cent of the businesses in the Lincoln Center, which faces O Street, for a repavement and beautification district to be started in early spring, said Sam Marchese, O Street Task Force chairman and manager of Brandeis.

Wider Sidewalks

"We plan to do ordinary repaving of the street," he said, "and also plan to put in new, wider sidewalks, trees, shrubbery and proper signing."

Nodes (10-foot extensions of the sidewalk at crosswalks) eventually will be added, he said.

Fifty-one per cent of the downtown businessmen's signatures must be collected and verified by the city attorney before work on development plans can be started as required by state and city laws, he said.

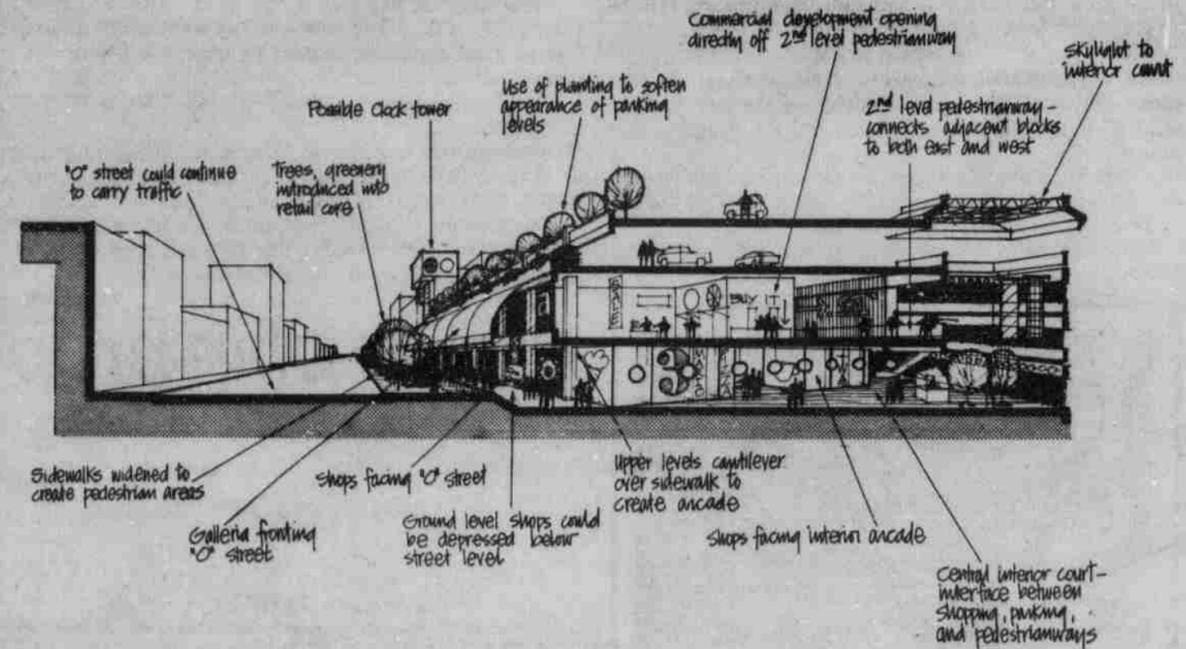
"There was quite a bit of opposition, because the property owners feel they pay taxes like everybody else does," Marchese added. "Gasoline tax money and things of this matter are earmarked to repave streets."

"But the property owners also realize the downtown needs this change badly," he said.

Bob Magee, LCDA president and owner of Magee's, agreed with Marchese.

Heavy tax burden

"Although we (the downtown merchants) know it is a small portion of the total area of Lincoln, the businesses here pay over 10 per cent of the taxes for all of the city,"



A proposed view of the Centrum redevelopment plan for downtown Lincoln.

he said. "Yet they are nowhere near a tenth of the total area of the city."

"If we allow it to deteriorate, like it has happened in so many cities," Magee added, "your tax base goes down and that means that people who are home-owners have to pay that much more tax to support the city."

The Lincoln Center project is "necessary and exciting" in terms of what it means to the preservation of downtown shopping and business, he said.

He cited the J Street task force as an example.

"The J Street task force is composed of many property owners on J Street, who figure if they have an interest in keeping the value of their property high, they should have an interest in making sure the street is a beautiful and strong connection between the Capitol and the City-County Building," Magee said.

Spring completion

The basic construction and recurbings of J Street is completed, he said, and the addition of ornamental lighting and landscaping in late spring will finish the project.

Street improvements also are being made on 13th Street between P and R streets, where curbing is nearly finished, Jorgenson said. Plantings and lighting will be added in the spring.

The purpose of the 13th Street project is to provide a tie between UNL's City Campus and the Lincoln Center.

Magee said the University is a close and captive business target and downtown merchants depend on the 22,000 students to help the downtown thrive.

Many universities built away from the downtown areas tend to draw the businesses toward them, he said, helping to cause downtowns to die.

UNL has given its endorsement to a project that will rejuvenate the Q Street area, said Deon Bahr, head of the Q Place task force and an architect with offices on Q street.

"Our district includes 16 square blocks of property between R and P streets," he said, "and a large portion of that is owned by the University."

The university cannot sign a petition to make an investment district without Legislature approval. Getting 51 per cent of the land owners to sign the petition is difficult, he said.

The university has drafted a letter endorsing the project, Bahr added. He said he hopes the mayor and city council will consider it in an approval of the project if he is not able to obtain the required signatures.

Crosswalks shorter

Plans for the Q Place project include repaving the streets, beautification with trees and planters, ornamental lighting and nodes at the intersections to reduce the crosswalk distance.

"We hope to use brick or gravel for the sidewalks instead of the conventional concrete in an effort to make the area more pedestrian oriented," he said.

The required signatures hopefully will be obtained by mid-spring so the project can begin sometime next year, he added.

Also planned for next year is the demolition of some buildings in the Haymarket Square area on the northwest edge of downtown to make way for parking and eventual buildings and landscaping.

According to the Lincoln Center Development Plan, the block bounded by 9th, 10th, Q and R streets and the area between the Interstate 80 ramps to the north, is a key entrance way to downtown Lincoln and should make a prominent impression.

Temporary parking

A distinctive view is desired, Jorgenson said, so the city will have to approve the type of retail or business development for the site.

Until a business is selected, it will serve as a parking area. But the plan has been disputed because Lincoln has parking area guidelines requiring them to be cemented or paved.

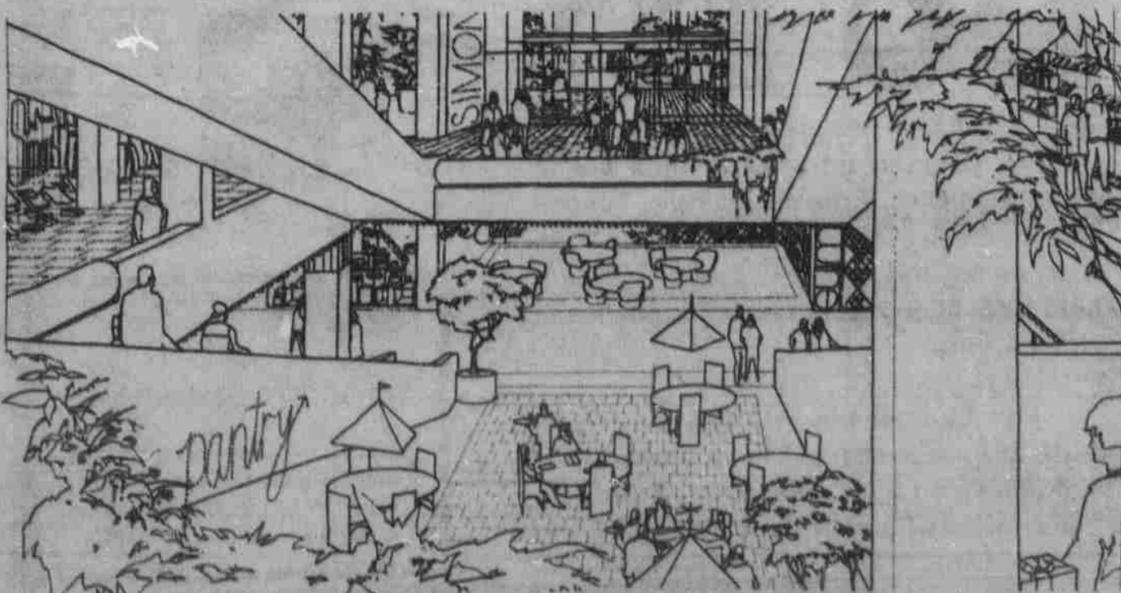
Plans are not completed regarding the Haymarket Square's immediate use, the Downtown Advisory Committee's office said.

The Lincoln Center Development Plan, drawn up in 1974 by Barton-Aschman Associates, Inc., of Evanston, Ill., is divided into three time sequences or phases.

The first, with most of the projects now started, extends until 1979, the second from 1980 and 1984 and the third from 1985 on.

According to Marchese, the third phase would remove all traffic from downtown O Street, making it an entirely pedestrian mall. Traffic would be routed around the district with north and south streets remaining open, he added.

Much dispute exists on the feasibility of the change, Marchese said, because it would remove traffic from the middle of the Lincoln Center.



The Atrium renovation will take place in the current National Bank of Commerce building.

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